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Perceptions of Students of Color About Their Experience in an Alternative High School:  
A Phenomenological Inquiry

by

Massène Mboup

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction

Dissertation Committee:  
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Portland State University  
2020

## Abstract

Public schools in Oregon have been struggling to include students of color and teachers of color for so long. Students of color represent more than one third of the school population, yet remain underserved, underrepresented, and over disciplined. Most of their teachers and support staff are White; the teachers of color represent less than 8% of the teaching staff. The students of color attend comprehensive high schools that generally ignore them—or push them out. Some students of color end up in alternative schools.

My problem of practice was the oppression of students of color in urban schools. Specifically, my research problem focused on their experiences in an alternative high school. The purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in that alternative high school. Using a critical race framework and phenomenological inquiry, I conducted nine interviews with three students of color who consented to a three-interview series in one month. Data analysis led to the identification of four themes: learning in an alternative school; welcoming and accommodating environment; lived experiences in alternative school, and absence of dominant discourse. My findings aligned with the tenets of critical race theory as they show that students of color were not welcome in the education system; they also reflected the findings evident in the research literature. My study revealed that schools should not focus on contents only, but should also use content to teach for diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Key words: Students of Color, Alternative High Schools, Phenomenology, Drop Out, Push Out, Oppression

### Dedication

I dedicate this work to my late mom who would not be able to read it because she never went to “school;” but, I am sure she would understand if I explained to her. She dedicated all her life helping disenfranchised and disadvantaged children. She would give my shoes to other children who did not have ones. She would love to hear about this study; she would ask me if the participants were fine and what could she do to help. She is my hero and my compass; I wish she could be here to hear the stories. To my dad also who provided the morale support and believed in me.

To Afia, Daour, Mbagnick, Mathias, and Nathan, I hope that you will understand that if “the old man” can do this, you too can lift mountains.

### Acknowledgements

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I thank my mom and dad who encouraged me to always go further in everything I was doing.

I want to thank my mentor and chair Dr. Micki Caskey. Dr. Caskey has been a pillar during and after my doctoral studies. She has never lost a moment to cheer me up and uplift me. Her contagious positivity has brought me to this defense day. I have no words to thank her. I will be forever grateful and honored to have been her student.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In public schools in America, many children find it hard to adapt to the culture. Most of these children who find it difficult to adapt to school culture are from underprivileged groups (Christensen, 2012; Freire, 2000; Kozol, 2012; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). Typically, underprivileged groups include students of color or underrepresented students (e.g., students from poverty, LGBTQ+ students). Students of color find schools to be spaces where they feel undervalued. Everything in schools seems strange and not relevant to them. This situation can lead to misunderstanding and decisions that can cause them to behave in ways that are not conducive to learning. As a result, many students of color experience punishments ranging from detentions to exclusion. Because many students of color do not experience success in school, especially by the time they reach high school, they are at risk of “dropping out” or being “pushed out” of high school. In response, some school districts create alternate ways to keep and support these students in school (e.g., after school programs, alternative high schools). The challenge is to grasp how alternative high schools can support the educational experiences of students of color. Too often educators and administrators do not know enough about the lived experiences of students of color to support them adequately in their alternative high schools. The problem is students of color have limited opportunities to share their lived experiences in alternative high schools. In fact, many adults do asked students of color directly about their experiences in small alternative schools (Cammarota, 2017; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

My specific problem was that students of color in a small, local alternative school, Change High School, need real opportunities to share their experiences. Their voices could help to mitigate the possibility of school dropout or pushout—for themselves and other students of color. Many of these students have left their comprehensive high schools and continued their education in an alternative school because they found no support system or inclusion policies in their comprehensive schools. The purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in an alternative high school.

In this chapter, I begin to explore the systemic oppression of students of color and their struggles to succeed in schools. First, I describe the background of the problem, note the problem's context, and substantiate its existence. Second, I provide a statement of the problem along with my personal connection to the problem and further validation of the problem's existence. Third, I present the research methods and research question. Then, I end the chapter with definitions of key terms.

### **Background of the Problem**

The problem is students of color have had limited opportunities to share their lived experiences in alternative high schools. Their isolations, and exclusions from the schools because of who they are or because of their reaction to these oppressive means demonstrate the systematic marginalization and silencing of the students of color. The oppression of the students of color is not always visible; the curriculum they study most of the time erases systematically their stories, ways of life, and experiential knowledge. This is an oppression that Ighodaro and Wiggan (2011) called “curriculum violence”.

They contend “curriculum violence” refers to the deliberate manipulation of academic programming in matter that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological well-being of learners” (p. 2). The “curriculum violence” and the lack of opportunities make the students of color vulnerable, and prone to dropping out of school.

Almost everywhere in America, public schools are struggling with funding and the opportunity gap between the different populations. Due to these opportunity gaps, students of color are at higher risk for school dropout. In 2013, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) authorities reported an alarming rate of student “dropouts” (5%, 7%, and 12% respectively for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics). Some authorities and members of the public wrongfully accuse the teachers and the teachers’ unions for the problems of student failure in and dropout from schools.

### **Context of the Problem**

Students of color have more problems adapting in the school systems in Oregon than their White counterpart. The fact that they drop out of high school more is something that we attributed to the factor that are sometimes external to them (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011; Kozol, 2012; Luna & Revilla, 2013). In Oregon, not only has the school system minoritized the students of color, but it has also ostracized and marginalized them institutionally and socially.

As early as in the 1850s, the law systematically excluded Black people and Chinese in Oregon, as stated in the constitution (Brooks, 2004). This plight of people of color did not end with the rescission of the constitutionalization of Black exclusion. The election of Donald Trump emboldened the White supremacists to come to Portland

and parade as the Ku Klux Klan did in the past (Lisnoff, 2019). He contended, “The Proud Boys, a neo-fascist, far-right group march in Portland, Oregon (an “unpermitted” march), although they have committed acts of violence, and they are allowed a presence on the streets.” (Lisnoff, 2019). Within this context of marginalization and racial exclusion, the students of color in Oregon have had to live their lives.

The oppression of students of color has been present in schools and society. These oppressed students have dropped out or have been pushed out of school because of the way society and the educational system exist in a neoliberal capitalist society (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The neoliberal system has not supported the oppressed students. The neoliberal agenda that international capital engenders has not fostered the belief in a public sector; schools, for neoliberal believers, should be profitable in the real sense of capitalist profit (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). This neoliberal belief (Friedman & Friedman, 1990) resulted in the progressive “businessification of education” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001, p. 142). In other words, education has become a commodity to put in the market for profit.

### **Substantiate the Existence of the Problem**

In the State of Oregon, the population that interests me is the set of victims of the neoliberal policies of privatization and less government implemented by the successive governments since President Ronald Reagan. These oppressed students are generally most vulnerable (Kozol, 2012; Luna & Revilla, 2013). Oppressed students

are either from poor, working-class families or racially discriminated against by the long-established racist system—one that is against them (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) (2014) has had much discussion about “closing the achievement gap” (p. 1). The Confederation of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) announced in the ODE website that:

The Academic Achievement Gap describes the gap in achievement that often exists between low income or minority students and their peers. Oregon's African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates than their White or Asian peers. (Para. 1)

This gap was a result of a clear race, and class difference as shown in Tables 1 and 2—Economically disadvantaged, American Indian, Black, Hispanic origin, and others, vs. Whites and Multi-racial—or/and of a racial divide, as the data from ODE (2013) showed. COSA recognized the need to address the gap in educational outcomes. To address the gap, the ODE (2013) identified “7 keys to success.” They enumerated seven solutions to “close the achievement gap” including (a) high expectations for students, (b) leadership and focus, (c) high quality teaching, (d) accountability, (e) professional development, (f) parent and community involvement, and (g) commitment to action. While I think the members of the ODE are concerned about the achievement gap, the solutions they proposed cannot solve it alone. The Oregon Educational Investment Board (OEIB) (2013), in its document entitled “Equity Lens,” stated its goal to bring “educational equity and excellence for each and every child and learner in Oregon” (p. 1). The OEIB

also recognized the disparities and challenges for students of color who make up 30% of the Oregon school population.

Another important element in the analysis of the “achievement gap” was OEIB’s (2013) recognition that minoritized students have not been treated equally in the school culture as their White counterparts who benefit from their Whiteness. The OEIB defined White privilege as “A term used to identify the privileges, opportunities, and gratuities offered by society to those who are White” (p. 6). In other words, the only acceptable narrative was one that excludes people who are not White.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

A critical problem is that students of color have had limited opportunities to share their lived experiences about being in school. Fewer students of color have had the opportunity to talk or write about their experiences when attending alternative high schools. For this reason, my specific problem focuses on students of color in one small, local alternative school, Change High School. I argue that these students need real opportunities to share their school and lived experiences. As much as I try to bracket my past knowledge (Giorgi, 1997), this study reminds me of my past as student and teacher in West Africa. Thus, in the next section, I describe my personal connection to the problem

### **Personal Connection to the Problem**

When I was in fifth grade, my classmates and I had to pass a national exam to go to middle school. I failed the exam, so I had to repeat my class. This was very hard on me. All my friends went to middle school and to a bigger city than my town; I stayed and



shared the same class with my younger cousin. In this class, I had to rewrite and repeat things that I already knew. The teacher made me help my friends to do their work and put me in charge of the workbooks and the organization of the classroom. In other words, I became the de facto the assistant teacher.

That school year was the longest I could remember. Every day, I counted the days left to retake the exam. I was very conscientious and helpful. I liked being in the position of leadership in the class. Even though I was young, I started to define my career. I was sure that I wanted to be a teacher. I loved helping in class and wanted to help students not to fail. So, I decided to be a teacher.

In my first year of teaching, I started as all beginner teachers in Senegal—teaching in a remote village that was difficult to access. The village had no tarred roads, so we had no good way to get to the school except in very old pick-up trucks that served as public transportation. When I arrived that first night, I was shocked that the school had no electricity. It was dark. When I woke up the next day, I discovered that there were only three classrooms, two of which were falling apart with falling doors and windows. The furniture was gone, so I had to start everything from scratch.

We decided, my colleagues, some students, and I, to go to the forest to cut branches to make tables and benches. I organized the parents and the older students to make the classrooms look like all the other classrooms with furniture for the students. In this village, I learned that teaching was not just a job but also a mission. I also began to forge my tools as a critical educator in this school.

These two stories about myself as a student and about myself as a teacher influenced my future. In both stories, I found myself engaged, collaborative, and full with initiating as a learner and a leader. As an educator, I also saw that I was deeply rooted in the tradition of the countryside people. I saw myself as a “cultural worker” (Freire, 1998, p. 4). My role was to engage in a discussion with the village people and talk with them about their lives and their language, which they volunteered to teach me. I had to adapt to them and have them adapt to me. Common to these two stories was the fact that I was not expecting those situations. I was uncomfortable, but it was rewarding to me. I was out of my comfort zone, but I was prepared.

In 1986, my students were suffering, like myself, from policies and politics that were beyond their understanding. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (WB) were dictating to the Senegalese government anti-social programs called Structural Adjustment Programs (Riddell, 1992). The government decided to apply those programs that destroyed all the social infrastructures (Weissman, 1990) and policies that were once helpful to most of the population. Those same policies forced me repeat my fifth grade because there were not enough schools to shelter all the fifth graders to middle school, thus the organization of competitive entrance exams to middle schools.

My career of teaching was already in the making when I was the helper in my second year of fifth grade. I felt revolted by not knowing why I had to repeat that year. The shame I felt when I failed to go to sixth grade was comparable to the dismay I felt when arriving in the village to teach. In both situations, I had to move out of my comfort

zone. I became a community organizer, a carpenter, and an educator—all at the same time. Supporting those children succeed was my ultimate goal, so I took my job very seriously. Despite being labeled as a failing school, my colleagues and I turned the tide. In one year, we brought hope and trust that had been lost. The villagers liked us; we built great relations with the parents and students. I believed in an:

...armed love, the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that we must all learn. (Freire, 1998, p. 209)

I related these two stories because they continue to resonate with me. They tied to my problem of practice, which is the oppression of students of color in urban schools. I contend that an unjust world economic order oppresses students of color and fails to support their success. This parallels the reasons for helping my friends and my students in my two stories; these remain my reasons today. As a critical educator, equity, and revolutionary love (Chabot, 2008) are two important concepts for me. In other words, I am committed to be an ally with these oppressed children left behind by the very system that purports to help them. In the next section, I validate the existence of the problem.

### **Further Validation of the Problem's Existence**

Recognizing that some have privileges and others are “left behind” is a good start. I contend that the OEIB did not recognize the fact that contrary to neoliberal values (Davies & Bansel, 2007), the social dynamic of oppressed and oppressors are created and molded by lasting class warfare, the result of the capitalist mode of production (Marx, Engels, & Bender, 2013, McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). Nowhere in the

OEIB (2013) document could I find the words “class” or “love.” The OEIB talked about race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, differently abled, and geographic location. Norton and Ariely (2011) noted:

Most scholars agree that wealth inequality in the United States is at historic highs, with some estimates suggesting that the top 1% of Americans hold nearly 50% of the wealth, topping even the levels seen just before the Great Depression in the 1920s (Davies, Sandstrom, Shorrocks, & Wolff, 2009; Keister, 2000; Wolff, 2002). (p. 10)

The unequal distribution of wealth has created such a divide between people that it is impossible to not notice the consequences in all spheres of society (Piketty, 2014). As McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001) described:

Neoliberalism ("capitalism with the gloves off" or "socialism for the rich") refers to a corporate domination of society that supports state enforcement of the unregulated market, engages in the oppression of nonmarket forces and antimarket policies, guts free public services, eliminates social subsidies, offers limitless concessions to transnational corporations, enthrones a neomercantilist public policy agenda, establishes the market as the patron of educational reform, and permits private interests to control most of social life in the pursuit of profits for the few (i.e., through lowering taxes on the wealthy, scrapping environmental regulations, and dismantling public education and social welfare programs). It is undeniably one of the most dangerous politics that we face today. (p. 282)

McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001) explained that public education nowadays increasingly lacks funding because of the meddling of private capitalists. In other words, neoliberalism aims to destroy the public service of education by defunding it through all its panaceas it sells to the large public.

I contend that neoliberalism is a central issue in education (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). When public authorities use the term “achievement gap,” they do not name the culprit or identify the real name of this so-called achievement gap. The students suffering from this gap are the “usual suspects,” the students of color and low-income students. This population shows higher rate of dropouts and/or push-outs than its wealthy counterpart does. To me, the measures taken to remediate the problem seem to be flawed; leaders do not take class into account. What seems to be missing from many teachers’ daily pedagogical practice is love—revolutionary love (Chabot, 2008). The children become the victims of oppression given the unequal distribution of wealth and lack of attention to assuring their success.

Specifically, oppression has affected students of color and impeded their efforts to succeed in schools. These societal issues prompted my exploration of the students of color in a small, local alternative school. The purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in an alternative high school.

### **Significance of the Research Problem**

A major problem in the public discourse is that some important members of our society—students—are not well served in the public schools (OEIB, 2016). The public

refers to these students as “minorities,” “underprivileged,” “underserved,” or “economically disadvantaged.” All these euphemisms mask something more serious. These students come from oppressed groups, people who are economically and socially marginalized by the neoliberal capitalist society; these students do not do well because of this oppression. The schools push them out if they do not voluntarily drop out of the school system. The way the school system subjects them to standardized testing is not only unjust but also shows that it does not work well for these students; in fact, it does not for any student.

In Oregon, standardized test data reveal achievement disparities. The math data (OAKS, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017) showed that students from oppressed groups are not performing well on standardized tests as their more privileged counterparts (see Table 1). Students who are White, Asian, and Multiracial have higher percentage of success according to their respective scores on state tests OAKS Score from 2014-2017. The Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) has 4 levels 1 to 4, with level 1 being the lowest, and 4 being the highest.

Table 1

*Percent of Students at Level 3 or 4 on the OAKS High School English Language Arts by Year*

Student Groups	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
All Students	67%	69%	69%
Economically Disadvantaged	57%	58%	59%
English Learners*	7%	6%	7%

Students with Disabilities	24%	23%	22%
American Indian/Alaska Native	58%	52%	53%
Asian (not of Hispanic origin)	77%	76%	79%
Black (not of Hispanic origin)	45%	42%	43%
Hispanic origin	54%	56%	57%
Multi-racial	71%	73%	73%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	52%	53%	52%
White (not of Hispanic origin)	72%	73%	74%

Table 2

*Percent of Students at Level 3 or 4 on the OAKS High School Mathematics by Year*

Student Groups	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
All Students	31%	33%	34%
Economically Disadvantaged	19%	22%	22%
English Learners*	5%	5%	5%
Students with Disabilities	5%	5%	5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	18%	16%	17%
Asian (not of Hispanic origin)	56%	56%	56%
Black (not of Hispanic origin)	12%	12%	11%
Hispanic origin	16%	19%	20%
Multi-racial	34%	38%	36%

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	22%	19%	19%
White (not of Hispanic origin)	34%	37%	39%

---

Note: Multi-Racial does not include students who reported Hispanic ethnicity—these students are all reported under Hispanic. See the Federal Race and Ethnicity Reporting Assistance Manual for more information. \* English Learners is the term for students identified as having a language other than English. This group only includes students eligible for or participating in an English Learner program in the current school year.

The Oregon Department of Education data showed a 24-point gap between students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch and ineligible students (ODE, 2016). The economic conditions were a critical factor for students' success in school as measured by these standardized tests. Indicators showed that advantaged students fare better than their disadvantaged counterparts. It did not mean that the advantaged students are naturally better than the disadvantaged ones. It just meant that the revenue gap has had repercussions in school achievement.

There are economic consequences to this opportunity gap. This gap costs the Oregon economy \$2 billion per year (ECONorthwest, 2015) and Oregon cannot afford this economic loss every year. This gap is bad for the students and for the State. Students who drop out of high school have more difficulty finding a job or having a job that earns them a livable wage. In fact, 75% of America's state prison inmates are high school dropouts and 59% of America's federal prison inmates did not complete high school (Harlow, 2003).

There are other serious consequences, as well. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime (Western, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2003). "A 1% increase in high school graduation rates would save



approximately \$1.4 billion in incarceration costs, or about \$2,100 per each male high school graduate” (Reimer & Smink, 2005, p. 8). “A one-year increase in average education levels would reduce arrest rates by 11% “(Reimer, & Smink, 2005, p. 8).

However, since incarceration is, in so many cases a for-profit enterprise, there is a strong neoliberal drive to fill the prisons; and most of the victims are youth of color and other disenfranchised populations (Alexander, 2012; Davis, 1998)

The evidence indicates a clear connection between education and economics (Chaudry & Wimer, 2016). The longer a person stays in school the better their economic outcome, and the better chance they stay away from the prison system. I argue that the high dropout rate connects directly to the oppression of students of color. Typically, they come from families that the wealthy class are economically and socially dominates and exploits. A privileged class that employs them at starvation wages barely keeps them alive. According to Chaudry and Wimer (2016), “For education, grade repetition and dropping out of high school were approximately twice as likely among poor than non poor children.” (p. S24). In other words, there is a strong relationship between poverty and education outcome. Dropping out is costly to the persons and society.

### **Presentation of Methods and Research Question**

In this section, I describe the research method and identify the research questions. To begin, I explain my use of phenomenology—a qualitative approach.

#### **Methods**

For this study, I use descriptive phenomenology, a qualitative design that explores the lived experiences of participants (Van Manen, 2016). According to Vagle (2018),

phenomenology is “both a philosophical discipline and a philosophical movement [that] began in Western continental philosophy in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when Edmund Husserl published *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901)” (p. 6). Husserl is the father of phenomenology who developed the concept of intentionality and phenomenological reduction or bracketing, or *epoche* (Vagle, 2018). Intentionality is “how we are meaningfully connected to the world” (Vagle, 2018, p. 28). In other words, intentionality is our relationship, or connectedness with the objects, the things, and the phenomena.

In phenomenology, the research starts with lived experiences and then returns to it (Van Manen, 2016). According to Creswell (2014), “phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 14). In other words, phenomenology allows me to know more about the experiences of students of color in their school and to understand the phenomenon of push out and drop out in schools.

Phenomenology is a relevant approach for my research because it allowed me to investigate the lived experience of the students of color in an alternative high school. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) talked about two basic types of sampling: “probability sampling and nonprobability sampling” (p. 96). Probability sampling such as random sampling “allows the investigator to generalize results of the study from the sample to the population from which it was drawn” (p. 96). In contrast, nonprobability does not use random sampling.

In my study, I used a nonprobability method: purposeful sampling. Using purposeful sampling, I invited three students of color at an alternative high school to participate in the study. I interviewed each of the three students three times about their experiences in Change High School, a Pacific Northwest public school. We met weekly for one hour and a half from March to July to complete the interview.

### **Research Questions**

To explore the lived experiences of students of color in an alternative high school, I used three guiding research questions.

1. How do students of color describe their experiences of alternative schools?
2. How do students of color explain how they learn in an alternative school?
3. How does the absence of the dominant discourse (e.g., the achievement gap) influence the experiences of students of color in an alternative high school?

To begin my exploration of these questions, I selected a theoretical framework and conducted a review of the literature review in Chapter 2.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

In this section, I provide definitions for key terms or concepts used throughout this dissertation.

#### **Alternative High School**

An alternative high school is any school differing in structure, mission, curriculum, or instruction from traditional public education (Raywid, 1994). Alternatives education includes schools or programs in nontraditional settings separate from the general education classroom (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

### **Comprehensive High School**

Keller (1955) defined a comprehensive high school as a school that “aims to serve the needs of all American youth” (pp. 31–32). In 1999, Wraga defined unclearly alternative high school by talking about value, size, and equipment. Hammack (2004) defined a comprehensive “high school as...tuition free and district-based, with four grades, and dividing time and space into major and minor courses...” (p. 26). In other words, Hammack talked about the high school with Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. In this study, I use Hammack’s definition.

### **Oppression**

Oppression, in this study, is structural and comprises all the constraints, hidden or blatant, imposed to certain groups in our society. Oppression is “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (Frye, 1983, pp. 10–11). In other words, oppression is debilitating.

### **Revolutionary Love**

Revolutionary love (Chabot, 2008) is the voluntary care, understanding, and support a teacher can give to students to uplift them. As noted earlier, Freire (1998) described revolutionary love as “armed loved, the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce” (p. 42).

### **Respect**

Regarding the term respect, Giesinger (2012) defined respect as accepting students as human beings with dignity despite their race, class, gender, abilities, and cultural background.

### **Pedagogical Practice**

Pedagogical practice is the daily work of an educator, her/his relationship with the students, school, theories, and society in general (Freire, 1970).

### **Dropout**

I use Merriam Webster's dictionary definitions of dropout and push out. Dropout is "to withdraw from participation or membership."

### **Pushout**

Pushout refers to "one who is dismissed (as from a school or job). Burbach (2018) stated, "The term pushout refers to students who leave school before graduating" (p. 5).

### **Students of Color**

Students of color are oppressed students (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; hooks, 1993; Matias, 2016) who include Blacks, Latinos and Latinas, Native Americans, and Pacific islanders.

### **Lack of Support for Students**

For the purpose of my research, "Lack of support for students" refers to what Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) meant when they asserted, "Many students lack social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health" (p. 405).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter, I draw from critical race theory and Marxist theory as a lens to explore the oppression of students of color in schools and society. I also review the research literature about school oppression, school dropout, school pushout, and support systems for students of color.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In schools, many students of color experience oppression. The problem is that the oppression of students of color is often absent from the public discourses such as popular media and educational policies. According to Cammarota and Fine (2008), “The hegemonic discourses that normalize racial disadvantages and reinforce inequalities” (p. 92) are problematic. In this section, I use critical theory as a lens to analyze my problem of practice—the oppression of students of color in in urban schools. I also use critical theory to describe ways to interrupt this oppression and support students of color.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theorists consider U.S. society as dominated by whiteness, a vision of the world that privileges White people to the detriment of the people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It “aims to interrogate taken-for-granted ways of knowing and doing by working from lived, often marginalized standpoints” (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 305). Critical race theory provides a lens to view the oppression of people of color and women.

According to Derrick Bell (1992, 1995), racism is endemic and permanent to contemporary U.S. society. This means that people of color will never experience equality in America. According to Farahmandpur (2008), CRT “Synthesizes the

‘experiential knowledge’ of minorities that they have gained from their experience with racism and sexism” (p. 13). This epistemology of minorities and their experiences of oppression are central in CRT. CRT, Farahmandpur continued is “a platform on which to critique liberal versions of Civil Rights legislation.” (p. 13).

**Analysis.** In CRT, according to Ladson-Billings (2016), oppressed people in schools have their stories and history suppressed from the schools (). In other words, the knowledge of oppressed people does not count; they are invisible and not relevant to the school discourse. Moreover, “organizational norms and the knowledge used to construct organizations are never neutral and always privilege some more than others” (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 306). In society, the dominant class imposes its ideas, stories, experiences, and histories. Because there is a lack of neutrality, school authorities exclude from the school space the oppressed, whose knowledge, stories, experiences, and histories are not in the dominant social discourse. The only way out for some oppressed students is to drop out of school or use their social capital to gain some of the privileges of the dominant class.

Bourdieu (1980) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). In other words, the privileges one has stem from who one is. CRT reinvents a way for the oppressed, the voiceless, to find their voice, tell their stories, experiences, and histories by denouncing exclusion, and racism and validating other ways of doing, thinking, and being. For, as stated by Lorde (1987) “The master’s tools will never dismantle the

master's house" (p. 98). Students of color need to be empowered to invent and affirm their own narratives. They are the only ones who can tell their stories.

Schools function on ideology (Althusser, 2006). One way for the oppressed to have their voice heard, considered, or counted in the school space is to reinvent the original discourse, life narratives, experiences, and histories, and then, have these recognized by the school. Another way for the oppressed to be heard is for the school, teachers, administrators, and authorities to use culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

According to Farahmandpur (2008), critical race theorists maintain that social class alone cannot explain racial oppression. For the tenets of CRT oppression in the schools is also the product of the permanence of racism that the oppressed encounter in society. According to critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1994), the rules in U.S. society have their basis in White supremacy and racism. Ladson-Billings (1994) argued, "Adopting and adapting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing it" (p. 27). In other words, CRT denounces racism and at the same time announces measures or propositions to deal with it.

Culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994) in teacher education add another layer to CRT. Knowledge of all participants (including students of color, LGBTQ, and other marginalized groups) needs to be central in educational research and educational practices. CRT proponents advocate for more teachers of color. As Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, and Papageorge (2017) reported, "Conservative estimates



suggest that exposure to at least one black teacher in grades 3-5 significantly reduced the probability of dropping out of high school among low-income black males by seven percentage points, or 39%” (pp. 2-3). In other words, Black students fare better when taught by a Black teacher.

CRT sheds light on the oppression of students in schools and works to eliminate racism and oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). It also “points out that there are multiple ways of knowing and doing, which can allow marginalized groups to take action, counter and challenge norms ...” (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 308). In other words, marginalized or oppressed groups must challenge the grand narrative; they must find new ways to be recognized and considered.

**Critique.** While CRT contributes to organizational leadership theory, it does not explain all the dynamics between the oppressed and oppressors. It challenges the colonial ways of analyzing and considering the academic discourse. It has allowed the revision of this discourse, or at least a reconsideration of the oppressed. However, it does not consider the relationship between labor and the individual, which engenders the alienation of labor, hence oppression (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). Marxist theorist Farahmandpur (2008) argued, “[Marxists] are troubled by those critical race theorists, who explore the causes of racial oppression outside of class oppression” (p. 14). Marxist Petras (1997/1998) claimed they “have never denied the importance of racial, gender and ethnic divisions within classes” (p. 5). In other words, those concepts are very important to Marxists even though they are not the fundamental element that class oppression represents.

### **Review of the Conceptual and Research Literature**

The National Governors' Association (2006) recognized that across the country there is a gap in academic achievement between students of color and disadvantaged students and their White counterparts. The NGA calls this gap "achievement gap." The official discourse about students' performance focuses more on making student responsible for the gap than other deeper cause that we will report in this paper.

When people reflect on the term "achievement gap," they can draw conclusion that students of color and disadvantaged students have a learning problem; that they are not teachable; or they may not apply themselves in their learning. Yet, it is a reality that there is a gap as shown in Table 1 and 2 (see Chapter 1).

Scholars addressed the opportunity gap of students of color in the conceptual and the research literature. For example, Flores (2007) contended, "Blanket statements about the low performance of certain groups of students in our schools without mentioning the underlying causes may reinforce prejudices and stereotypical images" (p. 30). Underlying causes have had nothing to do with the ability or "teachability of the students" (Greene & Forster, 2004). Such causes ranged from socioeconomic status (SES) to demographics (Brooks, 2004; Flores, 2007; Gorski, 2017; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). Irvine (2010) identified other more serious gaps than the "achievement gap." He reported:

These gaps include the teacher-quality gap, the teacher-training gap, the challenging curriculum gap, the school-funding gap, the digital-divide gap, the wealth and income gap, the employment-opportunity gap, the affordable-housing

gap, the health care gap, the nutrition gap, the school-integration gap, and the quality child-care gap. (p. xii)

Irvine drew the attention of researchers about the more serious gaps other than the achievement gaps, and called on them to see these gaps. According to Irvine (2010), students are defined by these numbers reflected in the standardized testing rather than these other important gaps that cause these results in standardized testing, drop outs, graduations, and so on. All these savage inequalities (Kozol, 2012) are root causes of the gap that exist between students. Kozol (2012) documented the sad lived experiences of poor students and students of color, whom, contrary to the official discourse, society has framed to fail at birth.

Gorski (2017) called on all educators, teachers, and policymakers to use an equity lens to reflect on the opportunity gap. For Gorski (2017), the so called “achievement gap” is nothing but a gap of opportunities. He noted, “Poor students are assigned disproportionately to the most inadequately funded schools (Strange, 2011) with the largest class sizes and least experienced teachers (KidCount, 2016)” (p. 1). He argued that this is where the Ostarts. These students have had almost nothing that defines a decent school: no resources, no experienced teachers, no money to fund essential programs. Gorski’s stand on equity is a good one; he sees the problem holistically.

Milner (2012) viewed the concept “achievement gap” as a dangerous approach to the problem. When considered as an “achievement gap” between students of color and White students, the National Governors’ Association framed the problem in a way that considered the advantaged as the norm; and the students of color in deficit situation

instead of assets. Milner also developed the fact that the “achievement gap” narrative views the White students as “intellectually and academically superior to others.”

Researchers or educators used this conception to focus solely on outcomes rather than what caused the outcomes.

Ladson-Billings (2006) talked about an education debt rather than an “achievement gap.” She contended:

Chicago Public Schools spend about \$8, 482 per pupil, whereas nearby Highland Park spends \$17, 291 per pupil. Chicago Public Schools have an 87% Black and Latino population, whereas Highland Park has a 90% White population. Per pupil expenditures in Philadelphia are \$9, 299 per pupil for its 79% Black and Latino population, whereas across City Line Avenue in Lower Merion the per-pupil expenditure is \$17, 261 for a 91% White population. New York City Public Schools spends \$11,627 per pupil for a student population that is 72% Black and Latino, whereas suburban Manhasset spends \$22,311 for a student population that is 91% White (Figures from Kozol, 2005). (p. 237)

Whites students went to schools with more funding than students of color; underfunding explained why students of color do not do well in their schools. Talking about “achievement gap” seemed therefore not accurate; there was on the contrary a funding gap, a resource gap. This resource gap was not only financial, but it was also a human resource gap.

In Oregon, there are few educators of color. In Oregon urban schools, there is almost no diversity in the teaching staff. According to ODE (2017b):

Oregon has made some progress in hiring and retaining a more racially and ethnically diverse set of teachers, but this progress has not kept pace with the increasing diversity of Oregon's student population. Students of color now make up more than one-third of Oregon's K-12 population. The differences between teacher and student race/ethnicity proportions were most noticeable for Hispanics: 22.6 percent of students were Hispanic, compared with only 4.5 percent of teachers. Fully 90.7 percent of teachers were White, compared with only 63.0 percent of students. (p. 7)

The students in these conditions spend most of their time with staff not equipped to understand their needs and cater to them, because they do not know them and they do not know their experiences. In addition, many teacher preparation program and school districts do not train teachers to use culturally responsive pedagogy, a pedagogy that helps know more about the students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Burris and Welner (2005) argued, "Closing the 'curriculum gap' is an effective way to close the 'achievement gap'" (p. 598). In other word, if teachers taught all the students the same high-track curriculum, they all would do well. However, the discrimination between students and color and their White counterparts made it hard for many of them to get good school outcomes. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) 's report:

Black students, boys, and students with disabilities were disproportionately disciplined in K-12 public schools, according to our analysis of Education's most recent CRDC (Civil Rights Data Collection) data. This pattern of

disproportionate discipline persisted regardless of the type of disciplinary action,

level of school poverty, or type of public school these students attended. (p. 12)

Research also showed that students who experience discipline that removes them from the classroom were more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system. This, in turn, could result in decreased earning potential and added costs to society (lost tax revenue and incarceration) (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

What many authorities in education labeled as the “achievement gap” was just another way of putting a false diagnosis on a disease that is very costly to society. The “achievement gap” was a term that blurred people’s vision of the real problem. In other words, the tree hid the forest. The problem was more an opportunity gap than an achievement gap. Children with well-funded, well-equipped schools always fared better than their counterparts in very dysfunctional schools where there nothing. The opportunity gap has had a solution in the increase or creation of opportunity for the disenfranchised students.

In this section, I review the literature about racism in Oregon schools, teachers of color in Oregon, the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students of color, lack of support system for oppressed students in Oregon schools, the neoliberal agenda in school, and the poverty factor in students’ experiences in schools.

### **Racism in Oregon High Schools**

Racism is endemic in the Oregon high schools. In Oregon, institutional racism is evident in the school system (Gillborn, 2006; Trepagnier, 2017). People of color

experience a great deal of problems in the schools, ranging from racial harassments from their peers to systematic cultural exclusion. Most of the representations in the school are cultural representation of the dominant White culture, making the “minority” (a very controversial term) not counted or represented.

Oregon has a dark racist past. In 1857, the people of Oregon adopted a constitution, the Article 1, Section 35 (see Oregon State Archives Transcribed 1857 Oregon Constitution) that included:

No free negro, or mulatto, not residing in this State at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall come, reside, or be within this State, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein; and the Legislative Assembly shall provide by penal laws, for the removal, by public officers, of all such negroes, and mulattoes, and for their effectual exclusion from the State, and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state, or employ, or harbor them. (Adopted on September 18, 1857)

This section of the Oregon constitution made it very clear that Oregon never tolerated racial inclusion. It helped to explain why Oregon has a very insignificant population of Black people, 2.2% of the overall Oregon population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). While the Oregon legislature repealed Section 35 of the constitution on November 2, 1926, this historical evidence provides documentation about the reasons for few Black people living in the state of Oregon. Oregon institutions had also denied access to real estate property and employers good paying jobs to “minorities” until recently. The Ku Klux Klan had

strong grips in Oregon and Portland, in particular, with thousands of members (Jackson, 1967).

Oregon and Portland's history made it clear why racism became part of the daily life of people of color; and this did not exclude the daily lives of students of color in Oregon schools. For example, in Lake Oswego school district, the local newspaper reported the story of some Black students who said that others called them "niggers" or other racist slurs every day at school (Holley, 2018). The way that many administrators and school authorities dealt with this hate crime in the school spaces encouraged the perpetrators to continue these hurtful behaviors against students of color. The zero tolerance policy applied mostly to students of color (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). "The term 'zero tolerance' was borrowed, in part, from the field of criminal justice which was applying the term to a number of policies aimed at drug and weapon infractions" (Curran, 2017, p. 2).

Cases of racism in Oregon schools continued to be more frequent as there were few educators of color in the Oregon schools (ODE, 2017a). The Oregon Statewide Report Card 2016-17 showed dramatic discrepancies in the teacher student race/ethnicity proportion.

### **Educators of Colors in Oregon**

As previously stated, there are few teachers of color in Oregon. The students in these conditions spend most of the time with staff not equipped to understand their needs and cater to them, because they did not know them and they did not know their experiences. In addition, most of teachers received little or no training to use culturally



responsive pedagogy, a pedagogy that helped teachers know more about the students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

After the racist incident in Lake Oswego, the school district posted a notice on their website. They would provide more culturally responsive training to their teachers and staff, they would also hire a diversity director to deal with race relations in the schools (Holley, 2018). Culturally responsive pedagogy was a concept that Ladson-Billings (1994) explored and considered relevant to support oppressed students. The district's attempt will be vain if the district's only people of color are the physical education teachers and the football or basketball coaches.

Diversity in staffing is important for many reasons. In other words, Black students fare better when taught by a Black teacher between grades 3-5. The lack of teachers of color in Oregon is a serious question to explore for solutions; however, it is not more important than the over disciplining of student of color (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

### **School Suspension, Exclusion, and Students of Color**

The over-disciplining of students of color is a national phenomenon. Researchers reported alarming numbers. Schools suspended or expelled Black K-12 students about three times as often as their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). From 1999 to 2007, suspension rates among Black high school students increased from 37% to 49% while remaining stagnant for whites (18.2% in 1999 and 17.7% in 2007) (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011). During the same time, high school expulsion rates increased for Blacks from 6.5% to 10.3% but decreased for Whites

from 1.8% to 1.1% (Aud et al., 2011). These numbers showed a real discrepancy between Black students and their White counterparts.

In Oregon's Multnomah County, the statistics reflected the national statistics. Specifically, African-American, and Hispanic/Latino students are excluded at higher rates, which mirror national numbers, but locally we see Native American student population exclusions are higher for that subgroup as well. Available data does not isolate students from Slavic or African Immigrant populations. We support efforts to further disaggregate data in non-traditional ways to find these students.

- African-American exclusions exist at a rate of nearly 40 per every 100 students. Almost 3.5 times the rate of White students
- Hispanic/Latino exclusions exist at a rate of nearly 23 per every 100 students. Almost twice the rate of White students
- Native American exclusions exist at a rate of nearly 26 per every 100 students. Nearly 2.2 times the rate of White students (Stavenjord, 2012, p. 18)

These numbers documented how students of color have been unfairly treated compared to their White counterparts. According to Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010), people cannot explain the achievement gap without the “discipline gap.” Their research findings about school discipline showed that “Black, Latino, and American Indian students are over selected and over sanctioned in the discipline system” (p. 59). In other words,

schools served minorities with disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion to a draconian degree compared to their non-minority counterparts.

These suspensions result in many missed instructional hours, hence the risk of school failure and dropout. The term “pushout” more accurately described “dropout” rate. Burbach (2018) explained, “The term pushout refers to students who leave school before graduating. Since the 1990s, the term dropout has declined in use, leaving an opening for terms like pushout to enter popular discourse” (p. 5). Gregory et al. (2010) concluded that race, and low achievement, are the true causes of suspension, thus the term “discipline gap.” They also believed that the discipline gap does not have the attention it deserves.

In my exploration of oppression in urban schools, the disciplinary actions were relevant data. This discipline gap continued to be very serious as frequent suspensions increased the risk of bad academic outcomes (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Once schools pushed students out, they generally engaged in law-breaking activities and often ended up in the “prison industrial complex” (Davis, 1998, p. 2). This oppression manifested itself in the over disciplining of the underrepresented, and pushed the students out of the school system with all the unfortunate consequences. One of the most serious consequences of this institutional racism was the widening of the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012).

Notable, the suspension and exclusion rates of people of color are the consequences of a culture of institutional racism that pervades American society (Alexander, 2012; Arum & Velez, 2012; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Ladson-Billing, 2009;

Rocque, 2010; Wald & Losen, 2003; Wilson, 2009). These scholars agreed with the critical race theorists in their analysis of the achievement gap and its origins. Notably, Alexander (2012) contended Jim Crow is still occurring through the prison industrial complex. Similarly, Arum and Velez (2012) argued the consequences of unfair school disciplines mostly target students of color. Eitle and Eitle (2004) found a parallel between segregation and school discipline. Rocque (2010) reported that students of color have been overly suspended or sent to the principal's office, "especially African Americans, are more likely to be referred to the office or suspended than whites" (p. 560). For example, Wald and Losen (2003) warned of the consequences of the overrepresentation of students of color in disciplining. They contend such injustice feeds the school-to-prison pipeline. In his study, Rocque correlated discipline and race, finding that schools overly disciplined students of color. Wilson (2009) explored the effect of racism in Blacks and their perception by Whites in all spheres of society. Wilson determined that what reinforce racial inequalities are social acts and social processes. The former comprises the acts such as stereotyping, stigmatizing, discrimination in housing, employment, school admission, and so on. The latter refers to the ideological-political superstructure such as laws, policies, and institutional practices that create a line of demarcation between White people and Black people, excluding the latter.

Ladson-Billing (2006) noted her preference for the term "education debt" to achievement gap. The education debt is the opportunities to go to good school that were denied to people of color; it is the millions of children who were denied a good education. It is also the millions of dollars the authorities could have invested in

disadvantaged area instead of elsewhere. Later, Gregory et al. (2010) added discipline gap to the equation. The discipline gap is a reality in urban schools that is important to explore. The data given in Gregory et al. are troubling and convince me that pedagogical love is a way to reduce this discipline gap. Gregory et al. recognized a lack of systematic research for finding ways to reduce the discipline gap.

The students should know that education matters. Macedo (2013) contended, “One of the most formidable challenges of the twenty-first century is the recommitment to the principle that education matters” (p. 3). Macedo spoke about the critical pedagogy’s view that education matters only if it is not an “education that fragments bodies of knowledge” and that “domesticates.” Education is only emancipatory when it parts away from the “banking” and instrumental approach to education [that] sets the stage for the anesthetization of the mind” (p. 5). In other words, educators should teach knowledge relevant to the learners and articulated with their world experience and the world. If they do not provide relevant learning experiences, they create the pretext for the student to act out or just rebel because of lack of interest. Educators should teach to conscientize (Freire, 1983), and engage in teaching, which is an act of love (Darder, 2014; Shor & Freire, 1987).

### **To Teach Students You Must Love Them**

Lanas and Zembylas (2015) described a transformational political concept of love in critical education. Their work developed almost all the perspectives of love: “love as an emotion, love as choice, and love as response, love as relational, love as political, and love as praxis” (p. 31). Lanas and Zembylas believed in critical pedagogy;

they also believed, “The potential purposes of ‘critical education’ can be substantially enriched, if more attention is paid to love, particularly its socialization and subjectification functions” (p. 34). They referenced Biesta’s (2009) three functions of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Education allows students to learn attitudes or competences that allow them to have a qualification, a job; education also allows them to belong to a certain cultural or social group where they socialize with the different members; but they also choose to oppose that culture or social group that is the subjectification function of education.

Chabot (2008) contended, “Love and revolution are not opposing forces but two sides of the same coin” (p. 814). Love for them is a transformative political force, a material force that critical pedagogy should use not as just an intention but as an action. Chabot called it “revolutionary love.” This kind of love is the one that critical pedagogue should use to transform society and “turn anger into revolutionary love” (p. 42).

This love is the “armed love, the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that we must all learn” (Freire, 1998, p. 209). The lack of revolutionary love in the school and in the literature that explores students’ *failure*, “*dropout*, and *support system*, constitutes a gap in the understanding of the real problem. Revolutionary love can overcome oppression when educators use it and direct it to the oppressed.

### **Oppression in Schools**

Oppression makes students feel unwelcome in their schools. Oppression is a debilitating factor to students in schools. Unfortunately, the debate about school oppression focused most of the time on racial minorities; however, many studies showed that LGBTQ students are bullied and harassed every day in schools (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). The cost to these bullying and harassment is lower GPAs, school dropout, depression, no desire to pursue postsecondary education, and lower self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2014), and suicide attempt or suicide that results in injury (Aranmolate, Bogan, Hoard, & Mawson, 2017).

The over exclusion and over suspension of students of color (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) has been a form of oppression. The harassment and bullying were also contributing factors related to students of color leaving schools. The educational system has been unfair to them (Peguero, Bondy, & Shekarkhar, 2017)

### **The Lack of Support of Non-White Students in Oregon Schools**

In Oregon, the schools have not always been well equipped to accept and support non-White students. The proportion (ODE 2014) of students of color (more than 1/3 of total student population) to teachers of color is low (8.3%), is an indicator that Oregon needs to do more to accommodate those called “minorities.” Some researchers showed that students of color were less likely to be suspended or expelled when taught by teachers of color (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Schools in Oregon need to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy, which Gay (2010) defined as teaching “to and through [students’] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (p. 26). In other words,

school need to indulge in multiculturalism. Nevertheless, one should not use multiculturalism as it is by neoliberals. Sleeter (2018) contended, “The goal of neoliberal multiculturalism is not a tolerant national citizen who is concerned for the disadvantaged in her own society but a cosmopolitan market actor who can compete effectively across state boundaries” (p. 111). We do not need this kind of multiculturalism in Oregon.

### **The Economic and Social Factor of Dropout**

Low-income students are now a majority in the nation’s public school, representing 51% of the overall student population (Suitts, 2015). Poverty and exclusion are factors with long-term negative consequences in a child brain development and his/her educational achievements (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015). This research shows that socioeconomic status is a determinant of low or high achievement of school and a determinant of who graduates or drops out.

Bowles and Gintis (2011) believed that socioeconomics is a determinant in school and life achievements. Similarly, Macleod (2018) saw few chances of success for low-income students. He wondered, “Why is there a strong tendency for working class children to end up in working-class jobs” (p. 11)? Marxists believe that school is the best way to reproduce the society and maintain the status quo (Althusser, 2006). In economically poor communities, the authorities do not fund schools as they do in rich communities (Anyon, 2014). This underfunding of public education in poor areas has dramatic consequences in the schools that fail to close the gap between them and their rich school counterparts. Many factors count in student achievement in school;



economics is a seminal one. The lack of funding of public education is the consequence of neoliberal policies and politics. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) contended:

On one hand, schools do contribute to the ideals of democratic organizations (in terms of providing access to relevant knowledge and equal opportunities). On the other hand, schools operate at the same time in sustaining and reinforcing the logic of capitalism by functioning as a reproductive force that offers different and unequal kinds of knowledge and rewards based on class, gender, and race. (p. 142)

Schools are ways to maintain the status quo, which is why it is not a secret that it is a high prize for the capitalist entrepreneurs. Globalism ideology views schools “as a vehicle that assists the growing market economy” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001, p. 139). This can explain the multiple assaults of neoliberal forces on schools. As Ravich (2010) put it, “The best predictor of low academic performance is poverty—not bad teachers” (para. 14). In other words, the culprit is the political economy.

### **The Global Capitalist Agenda in Schools**

The global capitalist agenda of “businessification” of education has been in the making for a long time. In the 1950s, Milton Friedman believed in school vouchers and the freedom of parents to choose the schools they want with their vouchers. Friedman and Friedman (1990) contended:

Parents could, and should, be permitted to use the vouchers not only at private schools but also at other public schools—and not only at schools in their own district, city, or state, but at any school that is willing to accept their child. That

would both give every parent a greater opportunity to choose and at the same time require public schools to finance themselves by charging tuition (wholly, if the voucher corresponded to the full cost; at least partly, if it did not). The public schools would then have to compete both with one another and with private schools. (p. 161)

Friedman's view of education cannot be clearer. Education is a business. A school, for Friedman and his followers, is like any other business where everyone should be free to go or not; as if some authorities locked parents against their wills in schools. This so-called free choice is what is hurting public education by taking money from it to charter schools or other private schools, for states that have adopted the voucher programs.

For Molnar (2018), these Friedmanian ideas consider "children as cash crops" (p. 16). Molnar contended, "Private schools' vouchers and charter schools have become useful vehicles for funneling tax funds into the hands of private entrepreneurs" (p. 19). In other words, all these claims from the neoconservatives, or neoliberals, are lip service to educational reforms. Molnar (2013) denounced the commodification of education and the over commercialization of schools that are in the hand of businesses that are feeding their produces to the students in exchange of some money.

In Oregon, groups like Stand for Children and Teach for America are more pro-business than pro-children. Some of their members who noticed their involvement with businesses started denouncing them (Barrett, 2011). For Libby and Sanchez (2011), Stand for Children's support for Race to the Top legislation, a competitive grant program during the Obama administration that was another intrusive policy in teacher and school

evaluation. Likewise, the promotion of the anti-public school movie, “*Waiting for Superman*” (Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011), was evidence that the organization now stands for the neoliberal forces whose only agenda is to push for charter schools and privatization. *Waiting for Superman*’s defense for charter schools and its blame of teachers solely in public schools’ problems in America is another neoliberal push for school choice that will only profit the new “education entrepreneurs.” These multiple assaults on teachers and schools in general are some of the causes of underfunding of public education, the consequences of which are the lack of support of the most vulnerable student population.

### **The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

One of the major consequences of the lack of school support for oppressed students is the widening of the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is the way K-12 schools push students out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system (Welch, 2017). In this pipeline, Blacks are again overrepresented as their disciplining and exclusion from schools create their encounter with the juvenile and criminal justice system. Redfield and Nance (2016) contended that LGBTQ, youth of color, differently abled youth have been disproportionately arrested and detained in juvenile prisons. This unfortunate situation is one of the many ways that explains the disproportionate dropout rates in these populations and their dramatic consequences to society. The school-to-prison pipeline has high cost to society.

### **The Financial Cost of School Push Out and Dropout**

School dropout and push out have serious social and economic consequences. Ruglis (2011) explored “the relationship of education to health” (p. 627). She used a youth participatory action research (YPAR) of 22 participants ages 14-19 in New York City. The purpose of her study was to investigate how the experiences of school impact the students’ bodies. Based on her study, Ruglis contended that school dropout is a public health issue. She called it biopower. “The ancient right to take life or let live is replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault, 1978, p. 138). Education determined who is going to live or die (Ruglis, 2011). Walsemann, Geronimus, and Gee (2008) noted that educational dis/advantage in adolescence directly influenced health trajectories. There are other economic costs associated with school dropout and push out. Redfield and Nance (2016) asserted:

There are also more direct costs. Staying in the education pipeline and out of the prison pipeline is a huge cost savings to society. The Alliance for Excellent Education, for example, has calculated that \$18.5 billion in crime costs could be saved annually if the male high school graduation rate increased by 5% a year in our public schools (\$12,608 in 2010–2011). (p. 50)

If we increased the male high school graduation in Oregon by 5%, the state would save \$125 million a year in prison costs (DeBaun & Roc, 2013).

### **Synthesis of Research Literature**

Reviewing the literature, I noticed that the concept of school dropout has changed to push out in most of the literature. This change has shifted the focus from the students being at fault of leaving school to the institution pushing them out (Bridgeland et al.,

2006). For example, in their longitudinal quantitative research, Walsemann et al. (2008) found that educational dis/advantage in adolescence directly influenced health trajectories. In another example, Aud, KewalRamani, and Frohlich, (2011) showed the disproportionality of school suspension among students of color. Quantitative researchers have also shown reasons why students leave schools (Redfield & Nance, 2016; Suitts, 2015) and they proposed solutions.

All these quantitative studies (Aud et al., 2011; Redfield & Nance, 2016; Suitts, 2015; Walsemann et al., 2008) showed reasons why students of color, LGBTQ, differently abled, and working-class students have been pushed out of school disproportionately more than any other group. However, these studies lacked the voices of the main actors; they represented the actors with by graphs and numbers. What researchers needed was the voices of real people suffering from these real problems to bring their perspectives of real solutions for these problems. Qualitative researchers have attempted to capture the voices of the people impacted by these educational and social problems. Creswell and Creswell (2017) reported, “Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4).

### **Summary of Review of Literature**

Research about educational outcomes suggests that oppressed groups are the mostly hard hit by the problems in public education. From institutional racism (Gillborn, 2006; Trepagnier, 2017) to tolerance zero policies (U.S. Department of Education Office

for Civil Rights, 2014), the literature is strongly showing disparities in school, suspension, and exclusion due to racist stereotypes.

The literature shows that most of the time the students do not drop out but have been pushed out by a system that is dominated by neoliberal policies that position profit over the success of the students (Anyon, 2014; Libby & Sanchez, 2011; Macleod, 2018; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001; Molnar, 2018). The students that the education system pushes out are mostly oppressed students whose families have no social capital or just no capital for that matter.

The great number of school children leaving schools has deep social and economic consequences. The literature reveals that most of the children who leave school early are at-risk of feeding the prison pipeline (Davis, 1998; Redfield & Nance, 2016; Welch, 2017). The cost of school dropout or pushout is not only high economically (DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Redfield & Nance, 2016), but it is also socially devastating, as it has long-term consequences on the health of the population (Ruglis, 2011; Walsemann et al., 2008).

A large body of research addressed the situation of disenfranchised, oppressed students. However, few research studies truly consider the point of view of the students. For this reason, I am tapping student voices by working with them and listening to their perceptions and perspectives.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

As described in Chapter 1, my problem of practice was the oppression of students of color in urban schools. Specifically, my research problem focused on their experiences in an alternative high school. To study the problem, the purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in an alternative high school. I also wanted to understand the support system oppressed high school students need to stay in school, using phenomenological inquiry.

Phenomenology allowed me to work with the students to address my research questions.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do students of color describe their experiences of alternative schools?
2. How do students of color explain how they learn in an alternative school?
3. How does the absence of the dominant discourse (e.g., the achievement gap) influence the experiences of students of color in an alternative high school?

Using phenomenological inquiry, I explored these questions in collaboration with three students.

#### **Research Methods**

For this study, I used phenomenology, a qualitative design that explores the lived experiences of participants (Van Manen, 2016). In phenomenology, the research began with lived experiences and ended with lived experience of the participants (Van Manen, 2016). Creswell (2014) explained, "Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants"(p. 14). In

other words, this design allowed me to know more about the experiences of students of color in their schools. Creswell (2017) continued his exploration:

*A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. (p. 58)*

Before delving into phenomenological research, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the philosophies of phenomenology and the research methods drawing from these philosophies.

Scholars have traced the roots and philosophies of phenomenology to Descartes, Hume, and Kant respectively who “characterized states of perception, thought, and imagination” (Vagle, 2018, p. 6). However, in research, we started from Husserl who “opposed the mind-body/world dualism that dominated western thoughts” (Vagle, 2018, p. 7). Husserl’s most important assertion at that time was that “all consciousness is consciousness of something” (Sartre, 1970, p. 5). In other words, consciousness is consciousness of a phenomenon in the world. From the consciousness of something, Husserl developed the idea of intentionality as experiences are outside of our conscience (Sartre, 1970). It is outside our consciousness that we relate to experiences. People exist outside of our consciousness; and intentionality is what relates us to them. We love, hate, fear experiences as a way of connection to them via our love, hate or fear.



Martin Heidegger, departing from his master, Husserl, considered “being-in-the world” in place of consciousness (Vagle, 2018). For Heidegger, our being was being-in-the-world not a consciousness of our being. Nazi Germany also separated Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl was a Jew who died in 1938 before World War II. Some historians thought that Heidegger was sympathetic of the Nazi party because he never criticized them during the persecution of Jews. Some think that was the reason for Husserl and Heidegger’s their theoretical separation was the Nazi’s pressure of Heidegger.

The French philosophers recognized as phenomenologists were Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were sympathetic to both Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre was a descriptive and interpretative phenomenologist whose views were closer to Husserl (Vagle, 2018). He applied his phenomenological inquiries to literature. Drawing from Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, was more of a mid-body dualist and believed more about the body that lives the world before the mind (Vagle, 2018). These different, yet not far apart philosophers, were the most prominent phenomenologists. Most researchers of phenomenology drew upon their work.

Phenomenological research is different from the philosophy of phenomenology. Phenomenological research applies the latter “to study obvious things” (Vagle, 2018, p. 10.) Researchers are applying descriptive phenomenology derived from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology such as Giorgi (2009) who, in turn, inspired many other researchers. Other researchers like Van Manen (2001, 2014, 2016) are closer to Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. These researchers and others

use phenomenological philosophies to research lived experiences; however, they are not necessarily phenomenological philosophers.

Phenomenology helped me to describe the lived experience of the students of color in their alternative high school. Essence was what Van Manen (2016) defined as “that what makes a thing what it is (and without which it would not be what it is)” (p. 177). In my study, the essence was the lived experience of the students of color in this defined setting. In other words, my participants’ thoughts and feelings about of their experience in an alternative school became the essence of my research.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Another important consideration in conducting research is validity, reliability, and ethics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I recognized this was important when conducting phenomenology—a type of qualitative research. Researchers can address validity and reliability through the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my study, I worked to ensure validity and reliability by gathering the data in consistent fashion, analyzing the data systematically using coding processes, and basing my interpretation on the coded data. In qualitative research, validity and reliability are in the hand of the researcher. “...The qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s [researcher’s] conclusion “makes sense” (Firestone, 1987, p. 19). Not only does it need to make sense but it is also the responsibility of the researcher.

In qualitative study, one should consider validity and reliability based on the paradigm used in the study. Maxwell (2013), talking about the Indian story of the turtles that hold the four elephants that hold the world, believed that “you do not have to get to the bottom turtle to have a valid conclusion. You only have to get to a turtle you can stand on securely” (p. 122). In other words, there are many places you can sit and defend the validity of your research. Maxwell viewed validity as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 122).

One aspect of validity is internal validity, which “hinges on the meaning of reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 242). In other words, internal validity is the congruency of findings with reality. Nevertheless, reality is “holistic, dynamic, and ever-changing” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). According to Maxwell (2013), validity or credibility are dynamic in nature. A way to measure or test internal validity in a qualitative study is through triangulation (i.e., using multiple sources of data, multiple methods, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm findings). In addition, researchers can use member checks to ensure internal validity. For this reason, I used member checking after data collection to validate my participants’ words.

Validity depends on the researcher’s positionality. Threats to validity include the researcher’s biases, their relations with the participants, and the participants’ beliefs. In the case of my study, I must make sure that my position as a Black man

does not influence nor tarnish the credibility of my research in an alternative school with many students of color.

Validity remains a question in qualitative research; some even question its relevance. According to Maxwell (2013) as well as Merriam and Tisdell (2016), validity is more an issue of credibility as it is of truth. This poses the question about the nature of reality. Even though research is about real topics, its goal—at least in qualitative research—is not the research of the truth, but what truth comes out of the research. In other words, the truth resides in the existence of a credible fact, phenomenon, or the like.

Ethical considerations are of the utmost importance while conducting any research. As in all data collection, there are always ethical questions. In my research, I need to ensure I am doing the “good work” (Seidman, 2013). In other words, I must be fair and respectful of the participants. For example, I need to secure informed consents from my participants. Ethics is the researcher’s responsibility as there are many instances during the study that the researcher must adhere to ethical codes. They must be conscious of and responsive to the ethical issues they encounter with their participants.

### **Participants**

The participants were three students of color in an alternative high school, Change High School (pseudonym). CHS has equal number of White students, African American students, Asian American, and Latin@ students. I determined that three students of color would be adequate sample size for collecting the data necessary to conduct the

phenomenological study. The participants were two female students of color and one male student of color. They selected the pseudonyms used in this study.

My first participant was Tatiana, an 18-year-old African American adolescent and an out-of-state student. Tatiana moved to this school as she said, “I wanted to start afresh and away from drama.” She was “a fifth year” student in high school. She planned to graduate next year in 2021. Tatiana was a student who was eager to graduate because school is her “only way out of poverty.” Change is her third high school.

Ronaldo, my second participant, was an 18-year-old Latin@; he was repeating 12<sup>th</sup> grade. He entered Change High School in his junior year. Ronaldo was a philosophical person who wanted to dive deep into socio political matters. He considered himself an atheist, which, he said, alienated him from his family.

Nyama was the youngest of my participants. She was a 15-year-old African American adolescent. Her first high school was Change High School. She said that after a bad experience in middle school, she chose Change because “I was trying to get away from big crowds and certain people.” She was a smart young woman who knew what she wanted and why she was in school.

I chose these three participants because they were students of color; I did not select them based on their grades or other situations. In the next section, I describe my sampling method.

### **Procedures**

For this study, I was not interested in random sampling as my study’s goal was not to generalize from my findings. Instead, I used nonprobability sampling, which

Patton (2015) called purposeful sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 96). My goals were to discover and understand the lives of students of color in their school environment.

The sample that I used is a “typical sample” that “reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). The sample was composed of students of color—male and female. Together, these students and I selected the site for the interviews.

My study aimed to give students of color an opportunity to share their stories about their experiences in schools. My goal was to take into account the students’ point of view and acknowledge their voices (Cammarota, 2017; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Given Chance High School’s diverse demographics, I worked purposefully to select students from Black, Asian, and Latin@ groups.

### **Recruitment**

After Portland State University approved my IRB, I submitted it to the School district where I had the permission to collect data from students. As the first step of recruiting participants for my study, I met with the school principal with my plan that included my timeline to conduct the interviews. After several visits to the sites, the principal and I set a date and time for an information session to explain the study to students. During the information session, I explained why I was coming to their school, what I wanted to do, when I wanted to start, and how I would conduct the study. At the

information session, I told the attendees about the study, invited them to participate, and gave them an Informed Consent Form (see Appendices A, B, and C). The principal and her colleagues recommended students to interview. I met them formally at the school and discuss with them what we were going to do. They were all excited to be part of the research. I explained to them the Informed Consent Forms. I also told them that we would meet three times across three to four weeks. Three students returned the signed Informed Consent Forms. I collected their emails and started formal contact with them. Once we set the first interviews, we used a calendar to plan the second and third interviews.

Unfortunately, one of the students dropped out of the process before we started interviewing. So, I had to find another student to interview. The dean of the students helped me identify a third student, Nyama. Because she was 15 years old, I had to meet with her parents to get their consent to interview her. Our meeting went very smoothly, as the parents understood the purpose of my study. They signed the consent and promised to help their daughter come to the interviews. Nyama was the only student I did not interview at the school because it was the end of the school year.

### **Data Collection**

To ensure that the voices of these students of color would be heard, I selected in-depth interviews as the best way to collect data. I based my data collection decision given Seidman's (2013) assertion, that "a phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of the participants and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 16). In my study, using interviews allowed me to know more about the

lived experiences of my participants.

While interviews might not have been optimal given the cost in terms of time, they have many benefits. Interviews are relational, requiring a willingness to contact and build rapport with others; the persistent trend of qualitative approaches potentially lacking the perceived legitimacy of quantitative approaches in some forums; and moral concerns, including possible exploitation of participants.

My fundamental purpose of interviewing was to understand and celebrate the value of the lived experiences of the participants. Interviews were a necessary part of the process of exploring how others make meaning of their experiences. Seidman (2013) pointed out that one best understands social abstractions through the perspectives of those who construct and inhabit them, but additional forms of data, such as observations and artifacts, can supplement—as one might expect, the choice of research question will inform the appropriate method(s) of data collection.

For my study, I used the three-part interview approach (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) emphasized the importance of a three-part interview series. The first part is for exploring a “focused life history;” the second part is for digging into “the details of the experience;” and the third part is for “reflecting on the meaning” of the participant’s lived experience as shared in the preceding interviews and looking to the future. While Seidman provided a great deal of other valuable information and numerous recommendations, it is the structure of three interviews, roughly no more than 90 minutes in duration a piece and spread over the course of 3–4 weeks, that is the hallmark of his



approach. His interview approach allowed me to review each interview and change the subsequent interview as necessary.

Interviewing was a way for me to hear my participants' stories. "I am interviewing because I am interested in other people's [participants'] stories" (Seidman, 2013, p. 7). According to Seidman (2013), "The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to test hypotheses, and not to "evaluate" as the term is normally used" (p. 9). I am not looking to generalize of the experiences of students of color in alternative high school; I am only interested in the lived experiences of my participants.

I developed a list of questions for the interview process, which I used with each participant (see Appendix F). I followed the three-interview series recommended by Seidman (2013). This in-depth interviewing model included three separate interviews with the participants. Seidman explained:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 21)

I made sure to follow the process as Seidman (2013) explained. The school allowed me to conduct interviews in a safe space. A safe space at the school was a quiet room where we could do the interview without anyone disturbing us; it was also a visible space where both the student and I felt safe. In one instance, I interviewed the participant off-site. With her, too, we had a safe space where we could conduct the interviews but at the same time we remained visible.

The interviews ranged in time from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. I met with each one of the participants within a 3-week window. For the first two participants, I started the contact in April 2019 and began their initial interviews in mid May 2019. When one of the participants dropped out of the study, I recruited another student and conducted the interviews later. I began interviewing the last participant the first week of July 2019 and finished the third interview by the end of July 2019. Because I had planned for the possibility of one or more participants dropping out, I had built additional time for conducting the interviews.

**Interview one.** The first interview explored the life history of the participant (Seidman, 2013). This first interview was an introduction the participant lived experiences in comprehensive schools. All three participants described their experiences that made them be in an alternative high school. I asked them to reconstruct their early experiences in life, specifically experiences in high school. This was the best way to bring the first research question “How do students of color describe their experiences of alternative schools?” Participants draw from their previous experiences in comprehensive schools to describe their experiences in an alternative high school. Students talked about their lives, the successes, and their challenges. They also described their family lives that contributed to where they are now. This first interview allowed the participant to have an idea of what we were doing and it set the pace for interview two and interview three.

**Interview two.** The second interview focused on “the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 2013, p.

21). In this interview, I talked with the participants about their current experiences, specifically those related to leaving their former schools. This was the time when we dug deep into their experiences to make meaning of leaving their former schools. I prompted the participants to tell me about their relationships with their peers, teachers, administration, councilors, and their families. I also asked them to share stories about their experiences in schools. These stories helped me to prepare the third interview.

**Interview three.** During the third interview, we talked about the participants' experiences and their reflections about those experiences. Seidman (2013) stated, "The third interview can be productive only if the foundation for it has been established in the first two." (p. 22). In other words, I built a logical link between the interviews. Seidman (2013) continued, "Through all three interviews participants are making meaning" (p. 22). Yet, in interview three, we only focused on the meaning making. Participants made meaning of their lived experiences in schools as students of color.

**Data Collection and Maintenance.** When conducting the interviews, I used my cellphone to record our conversations. I also took field notes using writing paper and pencils. I securely stored my field notes to maintain participants' privacy.

After completing an interview, I used an audio-to-text transcription program. Then, two graduate students from Portland State helped me to review the transcriptions. I made sure both were aware of the sensitivity of the material and emphasized the importance of participants' privacy and confidentiality. To protect the identity of the participants, I also used pseudonyms rather than participant's real names. I was the only

one with knowledge of participants' real names. The transcription phase lasted more than a month.

### **Instruments**

For my study, I used one data collection method: semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014). As noted previously, I conducted interviews using Seidman's (2013) three-part interview approach. Using this approach, each interview was 60 to 90 minutes in length. Because I was studying a specific phenomenon (i.e., experiences in an alternative school) in a specific context at a deep level, it required me to conduct three in-depth interviews with each participant. These interviews produced an adequate volume of data to explore the lived experiences of students of color in a small alternative high school.

Importantly, interviewing was the best design and data collection method for addressing my research questions. This method allowed my participants to respond to a set of interview questions aligned with my research questions. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, interviewing is both a design and a data collection. In the case of my study, I collected my data with different forms of interviews, which was a less costly way to get data (Dexter, 1970). As interviews are "a conversation with a purpose" (Dexter, 1970, p. 136), I conducted individual, person-to-person interviews.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a Black male, I believe that the issue for many students of color is racism and the hegemonic power of the educational authorities. I also believe that the underfunding of their schools and the lack of opportunities are consequential; they are the main reason

these adolescents cannot stay in comprehensive high schools. Given my biases, it was possible to contaminate the data during its collection. These subjects about students of color are political and as such have the possibility of carrying my subjective positions. Being a male person of color, I certainly position myself as someone who could bring implicit biases into the analysis of the data. However, because I was using a phenomenological approach, I worked to bracket my own beliefs during the data collection to ensure validity.

I am also a privileged adult seeking a doctoral degree while these students are struggling to graduate in high school. This position of privilege gave me a certain power over my participants. Because I was aware of this power dynamic, I made sure not use it for any gratification or extortion of any kind. Instead, I honored their presence and their narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

A way of analyzing the data was “to come to the transcript prepared to let the interview breathe and speak for itself” (Seidman, 2013, p. 120). In other words, the interviewer needed to take time and distance from the interview material to avoid biases or prejudice. To begin my data analysis, I organized the audio recordings, transcribed the recordings, and marked each participant’s interview. According to Seidman (2013), interviewers need to “reduc[e] the text” (p. 120). For this reason, I highlighted important passages in the transcripts to separate the ideas made sense to me. As Seidman (2013) recommended, “In reducing the material, interviewers have begun to analyze, interpret, and make meaning of it” (p. 120). After I reduced the text to make meaning, it was

important and fair to check with the participants to see if I rendered their thoughts correctly. I sent a copy of the transcript to each participant for their review. They all responded that the transcript was fair and accurate. These transcripts were important for developing profiles and identifying themes.

Seidman (2013) advised interviewers to develop profiles of each participant and put them in groups that make sense. Profiles needed to reflect the participants' words. However, Seidman recommended deleting idiosyncrasies such as "uhms," "ahs," and "you knows" for the sake of the credibility of the participant. In addition, I hid the identity of the participant by using pseudonyms that accounted for the ethnicity, age, and the participant's socioeconomic status. I linked their profiles to themes that relate to the research questions.

**Coding.** Saldaña (2015) defined a code as "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data" (p. 4). In other words, a code captured meaning for my inquiry. However, Saldaña warned that "coding is not just labeling, it is linking" (p. 9). A code lead to a meaning; it linked ideas and data. Furthermore, Saldaña described coding as the process of arranging data to find meaning by classifying and grouping the data. Seidman (2013) called this process "classifying." In my analysis, coding the data took multiple steps. First, I had to read the data thoroughly; then, I marked and labeled the codes as I read. Using this method of coding, led me to classify codes and identify themes relevant to my study.

Specifically, I identified themes related to oppression, dropout, pushout, learning, and experiences in schools. After identifying these themes, I marked them and linked them with other passages in other participants' interview transcripts. These themes made more sense as I re-read the interview transcripts and compared the themes in different passages.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in an alternative high school. I used a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method, to conduct my study of these oppressed youth. My specific problem was that students of color in a small, local alternative school, Change High School, needed real opportunities to share their experiences.

In this study, I interviewed three students of color. After the initial recruitment, one of the students dropped out of the research due of family problems (a theme in this research). Luckily, I was able to recruit another student who volunteered, submitted a signed Informed Consent form, and showed up on every interview day.

### **Analysis of Data**

My qualitative approach allowed me to have three interviews with each of my three participants. After the interviews and their transcriptions, I was able to use different ways to analyze and make sense of the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended, “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 202). In other words, the data contained the responses to my research question. After I transcribed and reduced the data, I analyzed the data using what Saldaña (2015) called first and second cycle coding. In the first cycle coding, I used values coding and in the second cycle, pattern coding. Then, I clustered the pattern codes to identify themes (Seidman, 2013)

#### **First Cycle Coding**

First cycle coding was a first attempt to reduce the data. In this first attempt, I identified several codes.



**Values coding.** My emancipatory framework required that I used values coding (Saldaña, 2015). Saldaña (2015) defined value coding as “the application of codes to qualitative data that reflects a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her worldview” (p. 298). In other words, I coded the lived experiences of the participants to reflect their perceptions. Values coding was appropriate for my study because my research questions were ontological as they addressed “the nature of participant’s realities” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 70). The participants’ realities in this case were the lived experience of students of color in an alternative high school. Values coding also addressed their learning experiences.

As shown in Table 3, I coded the students’ interview statements using values coding.

Table 3

*Example of Values Coding of Participants’ Statements*

Statements	Code
T: ...a lot of the teachers and staff members out there, there is a lot of support out there if you want the support. If you are willing to accept the support and get help or just wanting to do better in school and stuff. It’s really your own self who holds you back, nobody else can hold you back in life so they have good support and out here if you need the support, someone to talk to or extra time or whatever the case is that you need support with, they do the same thing they help you out. It’s just, you have to push yourself to do it, if you want to be better or get that support you really want.	Support system
T: What I mean is it’s still the mindful thing. If they are not in their right head. You have to want to get out of the situation, it’s still coming from you, like, when you are not thinking straight, you are not going to think straight at all but when you want to be better, you are thinking like that when you want to be better, you	Emotional support

do better. ...that's coming from a person who has been through that like if you want to be better, you are going to go get it either way so...that's just to me I mean ...and it's true to me.

R: I remember, in [X high school] my second year, health class, the teacher was just say, "here's your work, "R, and have a nice day." And I remember going through like a big, bad part of my life and at that time, and the class was how we're talking about depression, and I thought that I was going to receive some type of help. But she was just talking about depression, like the symptoms and what the kids go through. But I didn't really receive any type of help in that class.

School not  
socially relevant

## Second Cycle Coding

To delve deeper into the interview data, I used second cycle coding. For this second cycle, I opted to use pattern coding (Saldaña, 2015).

**Pattern coding.** Pattern coding helps organize data into themes. According to Saldaña (2015), "Pattern coding develops the "meta code"—the category label that identifies similarly coded data" (p. 296). In other words, this coding method allowed me to reduce the code to fewer categories. For example, I combined six pattern codes (i.e., personal problem, self-perception, personal size, personality, hardship, emotional state) into one theme: personal issues. Using pattern coding helped me to reduce the codes and identify explicit themes.

## Presentation of Results

In this section, I present the results of my investigation. I describe the phenomena related to oppression, dropout, pushout, and experiences in high school. I also report on the themes identified during my analysis of the interview data. To stay faithful to my promise of giving students of color a voice, I quote verbatim their words.

**Tatiana's Story**

Tatiana was an 18-year-old African American adolescent who moved from another state to Oregon. She shared:

I have been to four different high schools... I did bad my first three years of high school, mostly my first and last year, first year and junior year. I will be a fifth year soon, next year. That kind of pretty sums it up...

Tatiana has been through a lot. She moved to different places with her divorced mother. This instability had consequences in her schooling. She reported being a "good student" in middle school before everything went wrong. In her own words, she expressed:

I just wasn't doing good in school....I didn't sign up for most things. I probably was in only the theater at X high school. I didn't really sign up and be active in school. I had personal problems, family problems...

She struggled academically and personally. Tatiana said she did not want to do anything at school; she was lethargic. However, she took responsibility for "not doing good in school." Tatiana shared the reason she left her comprehensive high school, saying:

Well, I left X high school because X high school is a regular big high school and stuff and I went to (another) X high school which was down the street, not far. It's a continuation school so I could make up credit faster. So, I left and went there to get my credits up. But then I went to the other school because I had to move with my mom in X city so I moved and transferred to the school closer to her.

For Tatiana, the continuation in high school was a way for her to catch up with missing credits. Because she found that the comprehensive high school was too big for her, she opted for the alternative high school. She lamented:

Next year, I will have to be here for another year because of why they break down the credits at this school so it takes longer for me to get my credits out there than I would have back in LA, because they cut the credits. So, I will have to graduate next year.

Tatiana must spend 5 year in high school to graduate. Nevertheless, she has been resilient and said she liked her new school, Change High School.

My current high school? My current high school is good. I like it a lot. I like everything I do. I am one of the most active students at this school. I was just named student of the term. My grades are good. I participate in a lot of things like I keep myself busy.

Tatiana has become very committed to her studies; I noticed that all the staff and teachers know her and speak highly of her. When I entered the school, they would tell me right away where Tatiana was and what she was doing.

Tatiana's size was a problem for her. Her awareness of how others viewed her body made her feel bad. Her perception of herself has been problematic. To the question of whether people treated her fairly or not in school, she felt upset when people fat shamed her. She recalled:

Like it doesn't even have to be a specific reason, it could be like even like a type of hate or guilt. That's what I feel like but maybe besides when I was younger maybe my size and stuff. People treat bigger people a different way sometimes.

Tatiana knew the reasons why she did not want to drop out. She understood the role education plays in people's lives. She said it clearly:

Yeah, I was struggling and stuff but I mean school is my only way out, I feel like.

So, I mean you can't just drop out. I'm not the person who is going to drop out so... I'm going to stay if it gets hard or not.

When I asked her why school was her only way out, she replied:

Because I'm not from a rich White family where I'm born into money and will die with money. So, not everybody in my family went to college. I mean finish school went to college or graduated you make big money for having you know, different degrees is stuff and having a good job that pays well instead of having minimum wage sometimes with a high school diploma you can't really do that, but you need a diploma to get up there. Nowadays you can't. Without a diploma you can't really do nothing ...

Tatiana knew the importance of staying in school and graduating. She also recognized that school is a way to change one's socioeconomic status. She has had a good relationship with her teachers.

She also decided by herself to move out of her state to come to her new school because, she said "I wanted to go for myself and see. I just decided to just do better and stop procrastinating."

While she took responsibility of not doing well in school, Tatiana also offered a deeper explanation of the struggle of Blacks in school. She explained:

I feel like the system, the system just fails the Black people. It's a failed system, some people make it some people don't... I mean it starts them off back with racism and all this stuff. I feel like, what is it? Oh God... Yeah, I feel like it's a repeated cycle. Most people, a lot of Black people fail.

She saw a school system not made for Black students, a system that is failing them. For her "...a lot of people are racist or sometimes it is like the people who are in charge of it, or the teachers are like the same things like you don't know."

Tatiana believed that racism was the root of the problem; institutional racism, as she mentioned, was when even the authorities were sometimes racist. Despite this racism, she did not feel that it was a fatality that people cannot repair. She explained:

...in, like your families and stuff, somebody could have like a certain problem, but they have kids and the kids have a certain problem like it's an ongoing cycle is, is the channel that hasn't been broken, like. It's like some, like a person, it has to be somebody in the family to break the cycle, somebody will just step off the box and break the cycle, and choose not to be of or be or do something a certain way. ...what I mean... that's the ongoing cycle until somebody choose to step out and do better. Yeah, do better and just do what's best for them what else not.

They don't want to have their kids go through that and repeat it...

Tatiana felt school was a way to challenge the social stratification. She believed that by staying in school she could change her situation. While her parents did not graduate from

high school, her sister did graduate from high school; she wants to graduate as well. She reported attending multiple alternative schools; yet, Tatiana did not blame the schools for her struggles. She said:

It wasn't the school's fault. I felt like it was mine. In my high school years, I felt like it was mine. It wasn't the school. My teachers pushed me out to do better. That was me that wasn't [doing better]. So, I would say it depends. And it's different for everybody else.

When I asked her to say why it was her fault, she responded, "I don't want to talk about that." Tatiana remained optimistic and thought that "...minor setback is where magic comes up. So, I mean, if you do another year, I don't really think it's a problem. Like it just took you longer to get to where you want it to go, be." Tatiana revealed that she wants to graduate and go to college to become a nurse.

### **Ronaldo's Story**

Ronaldo was an 18-year-old Latin@ student in 12th grade. He has been going to this alternative school since his junior year. He shared that he is going to repeat 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Ronaldo attended to two comprehensive high schools before coming to Change High School. He said:

My first high school that I went was X. And it was pretty good, but kind of a distraction over the students that were like... set. That were, ... had more expectations than others.... The second school I went was MX, which was more of like, more troubled kids, but they kind of got by their grades, I guess. And, my

third and fourth school was this school, so I transferred a lot through high school.

Each year bring a different school.

Ronaldo's assertion clearly showed his struggle with staying in a school. He justified his struggle and contended that in his first high school:

...the teachers really had a different type of liking to specific students. I remember from my experience my teachers were like... Half of my teachers would care about what I would do, and the others were like... would not even give me work, or just not even look my way. But I guess...other students that weren't, like... that were White, they were like treated better, I guess. They had more of a respect than other students.

In other words, Ronaldo did not think that half of his teachers were fair. He believed that they discriminated based on race. Teachers treated White students better than the students of color. He gave an example of a math teacher who "wouldn't focus on the minority" students. He said, "But would rather work with the students that were White. And... never even, like, never really cared about our grades." For Ronaldo, these were some hurdles he faced when he was in his first comprehensive high school.

His second comprehensive high school "was pretty good, but the type of students that wanted to succeed would actually reach out to the teachers. ...but the teachers wouldn't reach out to the students." He continued, "In this school if you are vocal, you do good." He asserted that the relationship was not reciprocal, because according to Ronaldo, only the students were trying to reach out. He thought that the teachers were not being good role models. He explained, "If the students wanted to go do something



else, like, go, I guess smoke, or just wanna be with the bad kids, they would not motivate them, or... not even look at their way.” So, Ronaldo chose to be with many of his friends and had no one to dissuade him.

Ronaldo also thought that he “wasn’t really pushed.” He said, “I was just basically there, just... finishing the work I could try to finish, but, uh... I guess it wasn’t good enough. So, I transferred out... Yeah.” When Ronaldo transferred to his second school, things were not better. He asserted:

I remember one—last year. ... freshman year in Y high School, I was around the bad kids again. And they kinda accused me of smoking some weed, but...I always kept my ground, and said I didn’t do any of that. So, I guess they didn’t do anything. It was just like the last month of school. I didn’t get no suspension or anything. Now that I think about it, I don’t think I ever got a referral or, or a suspension at all.

Ronaldo, even though he said he did not smoke, admitted “... almost, like, half of the school smokes weed.” He also disclosed that students were high in class. Was he among that “half of the school”? Such an atmosphere was not conducive to learning. He also had problem at home because his mom was not happy about him not “doing well in school” or leaving Y high school where his brother graduated some years earlier.

My brother graduated from [Y high school] and he’s like the first one to graduate in my house and my family. And, when I left... my mom wasn’t really that...that happy and ever since then she’s started like, calling me different names or

something like that and putting me down and stuff. I guess that caused already traumas for me.

Ronaldo was struggling both at school and at home. At school, the counselor told him to go to an alternative school because his “grades were bad.” He felt that he did not have a choice but go to Change High School or dropout.

I feel like... it kinda sounds I guess dumb, but I feel finally cared about, ... finally noticed by even the teachers or some of the students. ... I guess you're really like... it traumatizes you for not being noticed from important people that you see every day. And... just seeing the type of teachers and students that are here—really changes you.

In contrast, Ronaldo finally felt valued and cared for in his third high school. He shared that he liked it as “the teachers really try to connect with you, try to make you smile. Tell you, how's your day and stuff. They understand what you're feeling that day, your emotion.” In other words, these teachers cared for and supported the students.

When we talked about his view of his comprehensive high school, Ronaldo said harshly, “They never teach you something that will help you in your life.” He reported that the only helpful thing he remembers was when the teachers taught the students how to make a resume. During our interviews, Ronaldo was thoughtful and sometimes expressed his deep thinking about how schools should be for students.

Some students ... go to their school, don't really see a point in high school because of the situation at home, which takes away the value of the education to them. But, because their family has a problem with money, or just basically their

relationships, they believe that school really isn't that important, because their mom is struggling or something else. So, the teachers should give motivational support to students, so they can graduate and provide for their families.

Ronaldo shared that he comes from a family that is not well off. His brother was the first one to graduate from high school in his family. He also noted that the school administrators supported him financially by giving him bus tickets and school lunches. He was self-conscious about being poor, sharing:

The other students would know. If you stayed basically in the cafeteria, you would get free lunch. Because the students who had a higher income wouldn't eat that type of food, they would just go...go to a store nearby or something.

Overall, Ronaldo considered his previous schooling as "more of a struggle..." He blamed his bad grades on the teachers and his own work, saying, "The type of teachers, the way that teachers taught to students and just my capability on finishing some tasks." Ronaldo also recognized his own part in his unsuccessful schooling. He disclosed:

Always usually just let things [sit] on the side, leave things on the side, and just go rather watch a movie, or just be on my phone. But I remember the days where I actually focused, and I would get the job done.

Ronaldo thought the causes of dropout were the lack of support from teachers and family difficulties. He explained:

There's two ways I feel about drop out: one is that the person is mentally not capable of doing the work and just thinking that you can't finish any task is given. And the second way is, people usually drop off to provide for their families and

just trying to live because many people don't actually acknowledge the problems that students are facing.

Ronaldo was facing both situations. He admitted that he was depressed during his sophomore and junior years in comprehensive high school. His family was not wealthy and he believed that school did not do anything to support him. He contended:

I remember, in Y high school (pseudonym) my second year, health class, the teacher would just say, here's your work, Ronaldo and have a nice day. And I remember going through like a big, bad part of my life and at that time, and the class was how we're talking about depression, and I thought that I was going to receive some type of help. But she was just talking about depression, like the symptoms and what the kids go through. But I didn't really receive any type of help in that class.

Ronaldo found that school was not helping him deal with his real-life problems. He finally transferred to the alternative high school. He asserted:

Like I said earlier, things were not really that good for me, it was more of a struggle, but after leaving and find[ing] my true place in this school it feels like a good place to be, a place to get to know more about school. You get to know the knowledge you're supposed to know.

Ronaldo described his new school in more positive terms than his two previous ones.

During the interviews, I could see in his face the joy that glows when he talked about his experience in Change High School. He declared:

The teachers are really nice. I remember going to the school the first year, I did not want to talk to anybody, I was just in my own world, and just try to get the work done, go home and go to sleep, and then do the same routine. But nowadays, the teachers, I actually connected to them. And I talk to more of the staff. And we just noticed that we're like, we're okay with each other. We don't bump heads or anything. We're just here to get our work done, and just trying to do everything with a smile on our face.

This was a big difference from his previous school experiences. At Change High School, he said "Some teachers will actually walk around with you tell you how's your day and get to know you better." In this school, Ronaldo felt valued, very happy, and thought that his teachers are transparent and trustworthy. He recalled, "I remember, my auto teacher opened up about his past, and I get it. I understood his type of, his point of view on life and what he went through. And that's very respectful in my mind."

For Ronaldo, it seemed that suddenly, teachers started to be humans and were open with him. He felt that everything looked different from his previous experiences. He explained:

Yeah, the past. Now that I think about it, I feel like high school is just four years, basically, to teachers. What I mean by that is like, you're just going to be in their class for a couple months. And that's it; you don't have to connect that type of relationship. While over here, you're going to be in this class for a couple of months, but they want you to understand that you're loved and you're cared about in the school.

Ronaldo raised the question of love and care in education. Teachers showed love and care to their students. He was so happy now, and in five years he said, “I see myself more as a businessman.” Ronaldo felt optimistic and certain about graduating even if it will be after repeating his senior year.

Reflecting on his schooling years, Ronaldo contended:

As a reflection... I see myself, as an ignorant kind of kid...joining a part of a group, I guess...back then, I just really wanted to join something, be accepted...by other people because I wasn't really accepted in places. ....The teachers didn't really see much in me. So, I've already thought that...I remember hearing the sign that says the kid, he never received love, but at least like the thugs gave him love because even though they doing bad, they're still giving them love. So, I kind of thought, like I should join at least some, some kids that weren't really into bad stuff, but just, just doing stuff like that made them connect with each other. So, I thought it would be better if I just hang out with a certain group of people that would make me laugh and just, just be there with me for a temporary time.

Ronaldo saw his friends as the only resources he had. They loved him and cared for him contrary to his teachers and family. In fact, he recalled negatively his previous experiences in high school. He said there was no “acceptance, communication and motivation, basically. And support...I don't really think that teachers really care about that. I think it's more of a paycheck that motivates them.” Ronaldo expressed a harsh

judgment of his teachers in the comprehensive high schools. He had clear ideas of what a real school should be:

I think this would be an example of what an American school should be. For example, communication, relationships, the bonds [that] students and teachers create, rather than going just going to empty X high school like, and empty schools that don't really push you, I guess...What I believe is that the school system should actually help students instead of making more problems for them.

Ronaldo has become an advocate for his alternative school—one that he finds outstanding. He also had something to say about teacher education:

I think the teachers should take some courses to understand many, many things that can help us today from emotional support, motivational support, school support, school programs, like study classes, and ...after school programs to let the student know that he's not alone. Because many students just fall victim into depression....And I think that's a problem that teachers, teachers don't really realize. They just...I do think they just believe that students are there for just four years, you know, and they don't really care, they're just four years and isn't that much.

Ronaldo's thought his school struggles were in part due to teachers not receiving training to understand the needs of students who are in difficult situations such as depression, family problems, and so on. He believed, "Many teachers don't realize that some students are hurting on the inside and just want help." Ronaldo had lot to say because of

his experience. He has been struggling, yet he has also been working hard to stay in school. He offered a simple but very important conclusion:

I think that the school says, the school needs improvement in many different things from understanding students to providing students certain education and also many students should understand that these four years are important in too many different factors in life.

### **Nyama's Story**

Nyama was a 15-year-old sophomore African-American adolescent. She started at Change High School in her freshman year, straight out of middle school. Nyama had a difficult experience in middle school, which influenced her high school decision. She said, "I've chosen Change High School because, well, it's a smaller environment; and plus, I was trying to get away from, like, big crowds and certain people." She also shared that her middle school experience had been filled with drama:

Like, in middle school. Man, they kinda just brushed me off, like I wasn't—so when I went to school, in middle school, I would just go there just to be there. I didn't, you know, I didn't even touch a pencil, for real, because it's just like the teachers wasn't really into helping me, or helping me understand or anything like that. So, it's like- and then kids were just like.... I don't know...just, I don't know... all in the mix with everybody else.

In other words, she was not learning because no one seemed to care if she did. Nyama said she loves her new school because it seems so different from her middle school. She shared:



Uh, I mean, honestly, I love it. ... I connect with so many people there and it's like a big family over there, too. And then, but it's not like ... we're close but we all know each other's boundaries and everything...I have relationships with all of my teachers and they're not... push me aside because of my race or...anything like that. So, I just, um, I feel more safer there, I can say. More relieved, cause I've been drama-free and not having to go through anything. And my grades are on track too, so it was like, you can't have—you kind of just have to like, slither your way in there, and try to make sure...watch your surroundings, and everything like that....

At Change High School, Nyama felt that she was well cared for and had developed a good relationship with her teachers and school friends.

Her account of her treatment in her middle school experience was so troubling.

She disclosed:

Middle school...I would say unfairly [treated me] because of my—I believe because of my race and there—it was just like full of... Whites, I'm gonna say that... full of Whites. So, it was just like... I felt like all the teachers were Whites. There was only like two teachers of color there. ...so, they would just ...you know, the White teachers, they'll mainly focus on the White students. And there was only, in my grade, there was only four of us students of color there. There was only four of us there. So, when it came to any [issue]... they had a lot of drama at that school. And of course...students of color were always a part of that, even if we don't know nothing about it, we was always a part of it, because

we can just be around it. And they like, ‘Oh, so what did you do?’ and then they’ll try to make up some stuff, and then get us in trouble. So, it was very unfair, because one, I couldn’t get my work done because they wouldn’t teach me the way they were teaching others. And stuff like that...

Nyama believed that she was having hard time at the middle school because she was Black; she was in an environment where there were few students and teachers of color. Her harsh account of her middle school experience contrasted with her description of her alternative school where “they just let me be me. And I don’t have to pretty much just go to school and have a mask on my face, or on my personality.” At the middle school, she felt the teachers did not understand her, they did not like a person who did not fit the norms, or what was normal for her. Nyama rendered her perceptions well when she said:

... I’ll just have to go there and be somebody that I’m not. And then when I am...pretty much myself, which I am a loud person... And I have, like, a little outgoing personality. You know, I like to make friends with everybody. And that’s just me, so I guess they’re not used to that...

As she recounted the events and atmosphere of her middle school, the lack of cultural diversity seemed to make life difficult for Nyama. When she left the middle school, she felt that “it was a relief because...um, I get to start a new journey.”

In stark contrast, Nyama’s alternative school experience has seemed more positive for her. She described:

I find [it] very different. How they, how teachers teach, the support system and, I gotta say the school lunch too. There’s a big difference in that. Cause, I had way

better food in the middle school, I give it that. Just the people. And, like, the open, the open greetings that you get when you walk into the school, too. Like, my old school, you go there, just good luck with making friends. But once you step in—step in [Change High School], then it's just like everybody, like, greets you automatically with open arms, and like, ready to accept you.

The only aspect she missed at her former school was the school lunch. Nyama explained the difference in the lunch program was “that budget thing.” Everything else was better in her new alternative school. As she put it, “They're very much engaged with the students.” At Change, “Every individual student has their own good relationship with every teacher.” She added, “I [am] trying out stuff that I never thought I would do. Like, the automotive class.” She carried on enthusiastically, “I enjoy the math class. I love the math class. Because, one, I'm not so good at math. I'm in trigonometry right now. Actually I just finished trigonometry. I didn't know that I was good at math at all.”

Nyama has also been discovering a lot about herself in her new school. She explained her love of math and other subjects was because of her engagement with the content. She attributed her engagement to her teachers, saying:

They made me engaged. They made it, like, interesting. And just seeing them, like, and they're accepting my questions, too. ... they're going at a pace that I'm used to. ... they're not sitting here just going ‘OK, da-daddada.’ Just keep going. They'll stop and be like, ‘Do you get it?’ And then even if I hesitate, they'll be like, ‘No, you don't get it.’ And then, they're gonna re-explain it, and try to explain it differently.

Nyama received a lot of love and care in her new school. This loving and caring atmosphere made it possible for her love school subjects that she thought she would never care about or like.

Nyama has had her own problems. She was on an IEP (Individual Education Plan) for reading and math. She explained the reason she had an IEP:

Because, one, I can't do math on computer. ...I just can't test on computer.

Because it doesn't have all the, like, stuff that I need. ...I can't show my work on that computer. So, like, on OAKs tests, they want you to just give the straightforward answer.

Apparently, she has had difficulty with testing that led to the development of an IEP.

When Nyama came to her new school, her school life changed. She reporting earning better grades and receiving more care from her teachers.

Nyama revealed that she also suffered from depression that her family problems caused.

I just recently found out, 'cause my dad has been incarcerated for 11 years now and he was supposed to get out on October 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year. But the people wrote him back from his hearing, and said that he's not coming home till June 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2020. And so, that kinda, I was already in my, I was a week into my depression phase, so I already, like, I was already down. So, when I got that news, I just shut down completely. Because...I was so prepared for my dad to be home on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019 and him be here before... my sweet 16. So, you know, I can enjoy that with him. But I can't.

Her dad has been in jail all Nyama's childhood. She has talked to her dad only on the phone because his incarceration is in another city, far from her home. She expected him to be there for her "sweet 16;" however, he will not be and this devastated her. Nyama shared that she loves her dad; she called him "my number one supporter."

Nyama also wanted to help her mom. She said, "That just makes me wanna succeed in life, and, you know, be on top of my stuff, because I can take care of her. Get her, like, a house or something." She had an incentive to learn. When asked how she felt living with a single mom with five children, Nyama's said unequivocally, "...the people that live in a two-parent home, I'm not saying they don't go through nothing. And I'm not saying they don't have struggles, but I do feel like they probably do got it better than me." She was conscious of how hard it was for her; but, she also contributed positively in her house. Her teachers and principal knew of these challenges and continued to encourage Nyama. She shared:

... I got an award for, like, community service 'cause I take care of my autistic little brother. When she comes to work here, and she comes to work, my mom works mostly every day. So it's, like, me and my sister will, like, split up with him. But, since my brother been born, 2014, my life- my childhood kinda slowed down to watch him. Which is cool, ... I'm used to it now.

Nyama was aware that she is missing a lot by taking care of her brother; however, she accepted it as something she should do to help her mom. She considered herself as her brother's caregiver, and she admitted, "It can be a lot because I'm only 15." For her, care giving was only possible because she was in a good school—one that was flexible

...they just make my journey way easier for me. Because ...at my current school, we don't get any after-school homework. ...unless...in some circumstances. The only circumstance you get after-school work is when...they, they feel like you're just not gonna get your credit... at the end of the term. So, ...that's when they'll kinda push you. But they don't send a lot of work with you. Even if you don't even get it done at school, they're gonna invite you to stay after school to get it done with them. And then, so, but they make it easier, because...they'll help me get my stuff done. And keep my stuff in place.

Her alternative high school was in sharp contrast with the middle school where teachers gave students a lot of homework. Nyama reported:

Homework on top of homework on top of homework. I remember going to a conference, and they was gonna give me all my work so I can get caught up. When I tell you it was a big pile of work, it was so big. It was probably this thick. ...I didn't touch my work. Like, I don't know what to do, because you, you guys play favoritism and you only made sure certain people understood what you were saying. So, it was, like, why would I do this. And why would I do, why would I do this to myself if I don't even know what's going on... I'm not gonna stress myself to figure something out that I don't know nothing about...

The homework from the middle school was overwhelming to Nyama, especially as she put it "they didn't, no they didn't explain at all. Like, they'll probably say, 'read what's on the paper and figure it out.'" She believed that in the comprehensive middle school the teacher rejected her. She declared:

They reject... the fact that I am... African American. They reject the fact...my study skills. I guess I just don't meet every school's requirements. Because I feel like my skin color, and then, ...my learning, you know, the way I like to learn. ... And my personality, because I have a big personality...

According to her account, there was an absence of culturally responsive pedagogy in the comprehensive school. Nyama wanted people to honor her way of learning, her way of being. She asserted:

Yeah, 'cause I feel like comprehensive school, I feel like they don't wanna see people of color win. ... I feel like the system is built for us people of color to, like, bring us down more. To put stuff on top of stuff, for us. To shut us down. Cause I feel like nobody wants to see people of color win. Or succeed, or anything... That's what, I feel like that's what also makes people of color go harder in school. Because... 'cause we gotta prove to them we can... do what you guys can do, too.

She was conscious of the oppression of people of color by a system that did not recognize them, a system that overlooked their possibilities, their epistemologies, their way of being in the world.

Nyama also has had some good support beyond her school environment. She mentioned that one of her former principals "plays a big role in me keep going, in me keep going and striving to succeed because of those encouraging words that she said." She also acknowledged her aunt and mom, but thought that her father was "my number one supporter when it comes to, like, me staying in school. My dad is big on education,

you know. And my dad is really, he's just really smart." When she talked to her dad on the phone, he encouraged her. She said, "He made a dumb decision, but he's a really, he's a really smart dude, so when him... even in there [in prison] ...he was to get his GED. You know, in there." When she talked about her father, Nyama expressed feelings of nostalgia and love for him despite the circumstances. Her dad "went to jail his first time, I believe, his senior year of high school." He dropped out of school and, as many dropouts of color, ended in prison.

Not everyone encouraged Nyama to stay in school. She remembered her ELA teacher in seventh and eighth grades telling her "You're acting like this, you're gonna fail in high school." She never forgot those words. The same teacher, Nyama continued, "was really giving us, work, like, we some college students." It was lot of homework all the time. "Like, she would stack us up with something new each day." It was overwhelming to her when the teacher assigned so much homework. She said, "they be like, big old packets." When she asked, "How do you expect me...?" her teacher's response would always be, "OK, this girl [another student] can get it done." Nyama would answer, "OK, this girl's IQ is higher than mine." Nyama compared herself to other girls in a deficit like way, using IQ. Not only did teachers in her school not listen to her, but they continued blaming her for her "failure," which was really their failure to cater to her needs. She stated:

So, they'll keep pulling me out of class, and, like, 'OK, what's going on' I would say, 'what's going on?' And she's, she's putting other people's, ... she's comparing me to other people. ...that's the number one thing. Cause I'm not



other people. I'm Nyama. I move at my pace. You know what I'm saying? And I used to tell them all the time, I would say, I get my work done. I did. I just go at my own pace. I may be a little slow, but I get my work done.

However, Nyama reported that her teacher never listened to her. The teacher expected and wanted all the students to do the same thing and finish at the same time. She ignored the differences, the possibilities, and the lived experiences of each one of her students. She probably did not know that Nyama lived in home with a single mom, and was a caregiver of her autistic younger brother. Nyama disclosed, "She was the one that made me, like, hate school." She also understood why some her friends have problems at school. She recognized that it was "probably, probably their home environment.... Um, like, probably, like, just...something that they're used to. It's probably a cycle for them." This is the same cycle that Tatiana talked about. When no one ever graduated at one's home, graduating seems not normal. This is also part of the way most oppressed population feels. Nyama explained:

They probably feel... shut down at school. I don't know. They probably don't feel as smart as other kids, so they don't try... They probably just doubt themselves a lot. So, I mean, I guess their way of feeling- cause for me, I would say I would doubt myself a lot... I'm not skipping that class because I just want to be out of, out of class, because I need a break.

Nyama skipped the ELA class to take a break from the teacher with whom she did not get along. The consequences of skipping the class were she "failed" her ELA OAKs test, and she given an IEP. In her new school, she seemed to do better. She conveyed

that her only bad grades for the year were 2 Cs, and she would be able to fix those.

When asked about the reasons she was not doing well in school, Nyama explained:

Because, like I said, they, I feel like they make the journey easy. So, when they, the teachers start explaining something, the whites are just like ‘Oh. OK, I got it. I got it.’ You know what I’m saying. And then, the blacks, the students of, uh, color, they’re like, ‘Huh? Can you explain, can you elaborate that some more?’ And then, they’ll be, like, they’ll explain it the same way they did when we didn’t get it. And then they expect us to go all by that. So, I feel like, like I said, they just make the journey so easy.

According to Nyama, students of color did not receive the same support in schools as their White counterparts did. Consequently, students of color did not do well in the testing or in their classes.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this section, I address the three research questions that guided my study. The answers to these questions help me to describe and explain the perception of students of color regarding their experiences in an alternative high school. I use the participants’ voices to support my interpretations. I share my interpretations of the finding in the following four themes: learning in an alternative school, welcoming and accommodating environment, lived experiences in alternative school, and absence of dominant discourse.

#### **Learning in Alternative School**

Due to overrepresentation of students of color in referrals, suspensions, and exclusion (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights,

2014), many have no choice but to leave the comprehensive schools to attend alternative schools. All three of the students of color in my study, Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama, had bad memories of their experiences in the comprehensive school where they were oppressed and not served. Their accounts of comprehensive schools were all negative. Tatiana remembered students bullying her; Ronaldo considered that leaving the comprehensive school was “mentally... kind of good.” As for Nyama, it was a continuous struggle with teachers and other students. Once they began attending the alternative school, Change High School, their experiences seemed radically different.

### **A Welcoming and Accommodating Environment**

Tatiana summed up how Change High School has been a good school for the three students. “My current high school? My current high school is good. I like it a lot. I like everything I do. I am one of the most active students at this school.” The class sizes were small and the attendance was less oppressive than the comprehensive high schools and middle school.

Change High School was a community. Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama said that everybody knows everyone. These three students found that teachers gave homework only when necessary. They agreed that teachers were flexible with deadlines and that teachers provided real flexibility with the students’ work. Nyama clarified, “They give us time. They give us extra time. If we say we need extra time, they’ll give us that extra time. They’ll even offer for us to stay behind, and work on it with us.”

**Support system.** All participants recognized the good support system in the Change High School. Teachers and support staff went above and beyond to support the

students. They cheered them when they are successful and encouraged them when they are down. The support ranged from loving and caring teachers, therapists, and counselors to cheering friends motivated by “no drama” as Nyama said. Ronaldo explained it this way:

The teachers are way more connected. They motivate you to do things you have to do. And they asked, they also remind you that school is really important and that, dropping out is not an option and finding completing your dreams is, it's an actual need.

Nyama remembered how her automotive teacher was nice and related to all the students. “He is like a kid,” she said. He cheered them up every day.

**Social and emotional support.** Most of the students in the alternative school left their former schools because of lack of support, specifically, emotional support. Ronaldo struggled with depression and found out that even the health teacher could not lend a practical hand; the teacher just talked about depression theoretically in class while Ronaldo was fighting depression. Nyama too was dealing with depression. During our interview, she shared that she just emerged from weeks of depression. Tatiana explained her mental problems by linking it to the trauma that dates to slavery. She noted, “...a lot of people of color like had issues. I mean, we had issues since slavery...”

When Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama got to Change High School, they found the support they needed. The school had a therapist and a counselor who they could reach as they needed. They also had support from teachers and peers. Ronaldo said, “Some

teachers will actually talk with you, tell [ask] you how's your day and get to know you better. What's your interest? And they try to open up to their students more. “

Teachers shared their lives with students and supported them when they went through hard time. They eased the students' work load, helped them when they needed it; they gave them individualized attention.

**Teachers and support staff.** One of the most important criteria was how the teachers built positive relationship with students. At this alternative school, the students I interviewed valued and recognized their teachers' efforts to support them. Tatiana said, “I had a lot of support from my teachers... They are really helpful. They're understanding.” Ronaldo thought the same way and agreed that the teachers at Change High School motivated the students.

During the interview, all participants agreed unanimously that Change had an effective support system.

When asked about the differences between his current alternative school and his former comprehensive high school, Ronaldo reported:

The differences? Like I said earlier, the teachers are way more connected. They motivate you to do things you have to do. And they asked, they also remind you that school is really important and that, dropping out is not an option and finding completing your dreams is, it's an actual need...

He also noted that Change had other support if students want that support. He added, “For me, I wanted support coming here the first year. I did talk to the

person in the other room [counselor] about my problems, and she kind of helped me.

Regarding support, Nyama asserted:

Recently I haven't struggled with getting support... I have relationships with all of my teachers and they're not, they don't push me aside because of my race... they'll just like help me, and then if I don't understand it, they'll make sure I understand it. They'll have me sit there with them until I understand it... They give you the attention that they figured that you're not getting outside of the school doors.

Nyama recognized that, contrary to her comprehensive middle school, "They make us all feel equal" at Change. She concluded, "We have great teachers."

Tatiana contended, "I do have a lot of support." She also thought that Change High School was like her other alternative schools. She shared:

My word is saying nothing is really different. I just changed I mean I get the same hope and support from the other schools that I get here from teachers. I can't say it was really different, it was not. Kind of like the same just a different state.

But Tatiana also acknowledged the support she had at Change: "I have a therapist now that I talk to." She added, "You're your own pace here too" talking about the alternative school. Her teachers have been telling her "we are going to get you to college. You wanted to go to college."

Nyama also felt that she had great teachers who did not marginalize her because of her race. She enjoyed encouraging relationships with her teachers. Teachers in Change High School have been doing the critical work of supporting their students. Not one of the three interviewed students had a doubt about teacher support.

### **Lived Experiences in an Alternative School**

In this section, I shared the students' accounts of their lived experiences in Change High School. All three of my participants came from a comprehensive school (high school or middle school) that they did not really like. Their descriptions of lived experiences were in stark contrast with their experiences of comprehensive schools.

**School culture.** The students used positive terms to describe their experiences in Change High School. Tatiana shared, "I got a lot of awards. I get awards all the time, just teachers and peers whenever they speak highly of me or recommend me for something." She believed that her teachers wanted her to succeed. They encouraged her to always do better. Ronaldo contended, "Over here they want to see change in students and want to see them accomplish their goals." According to Nyama, "It's like a big family..." This alternative school was a community where they cared for each other. She continued to say, "I just like how... like, my experience I just like how... like, my experience, it's been, it's been very smooth. When it comes to, like, drama... and, like, me trying out stuff that I never thought I would do."

The culture at Change High School was different from the comprehensive schools they had attended previously. These three students considered their alternative school as

an environment of care and positive relationships with their teachers and other school staff.

**School environment.** The school environment mattered to the students. All the students interviewed said that their successes were due to a positive physical or emotional environment. The teachers' efficient and caring teaching style worked for these three students. Ronaldo said, "They're very flexible. They can let you bring your work when you are done without any pressure."

comprehensive school, as opposed to her small class size at the alternative school. She noted:

Well one, because I'm in a smaller environment...In my classes there's probably like 10 to 12 students in each class. Ten to 12... so that's even better for me, cause like anxiety and stuff is just like T, That's why she is doing well...We're all like family...

All three students also valued the positive atmosphere in the school. "Everyone feels safe, valued, and supported." Nyama said. She added that they "lift my spirit up. And that's when I actually felt good in school, because I was like 'Wow, I have people outside of my house that cares about me.'"

**Self-discovery.** Most of these students did not fit in the comprehensive schools' culture. Nyama found relief "to leave her comprehensive school where she thought she was treated as an animal." Again, Nyama expressed in her own words, "It's just like, I just never did work there. So, I didn't know what I was capable of doing, or what I was



or weren't good at..." She did not know who she was or what she could do until she got to her alternative school. That was where she discovered her math abilities.

Ronaldo considered that his previous years were lost. He discovered himself as a student at Change High school. He said he always had "many problems about self-worth." He reported that he did not feel respected by his teachers at his comprehensive schools. Not only did he discover himself, but he also started loving himself at Change.

Tatiana liked her school experience at Change High School. She revealed:

I feel like I'm here because I think here is where I've grown and gone to be successful. I like this. I just do a lot and I've been successful since I got here. So, I think I will keep going really.

Similar to Ronaldo and Nyama, Tatiana saw she was growing positively at Change and loved it.

**Fewer distractions.** All three participants recognized that the alternative school had fewer distractions and less drama. Tatiana admitted she wanted "a new environment ... a new start." She felt distracted back home; hanging out with the wrong crowd and in this new alternative school she has no friend that can distract her.

Nyama enjoyed the small class size at Change High School. For her, it was a big difference from her comprehensive school where 24 to 28 students were in a class. She said part of the reason the teachers were not helping her was the "bigger class size." She explained the reason her parents chose this alternative school for her: "We just thought it was best that I don't go to a big school, 'cause I'll be more distracted. Cause I'm...easily-I can get distracted easily." She said she knew she would not "get involved in any type of

drama or anything like that.” She was also happy that there was no drama or distractions at Change.

Ronaldo said “That was hard to stay in school because of the, I guess the student relationships, and the drama.” Some of his friends were a distraction. He said, “Every student wanted to smoke weed because they thought it was cool.” This was not conducive to a successful schooling. So, Ronaldo chose to go to Change to be more successful.

**The not so good aspects of an alternative school.** Though all three participants expressed love for their alternative school, Nyama and Tatiana talked about specific aspects they missed from the comprehensive school.

Nyama missed the sports teams that her school does not have and the cafeteria in her comprehensive middle school. She recalled:

They make pizza every day...I had way better food in the middle school. Like, just decent stuff each day. But just particularly on Thursdays and Mondays, there'll be cheeseburger and hamburger or pizza. And the pizza was good and not dried out.

Tatiana thought that the alternative school did not have many students or teachers of color compared to her former comprehensive school. Nevertheless, unlike the other two participants, Tatiana did not see anything bad at Change High School. She only noted that the school did not represent her culture.

As for Roberto, he thought that all was good and does not regret anything from his previous comprehensive schools.

Overall, these three students of color had more positive experiences in their alternative high school than they did in their comprehensive schools—whether middle school or high school.

### **The Absence of the Dominant Discourse**

The dominant discourse in education has shown a deficit perspective when it comes to students of color (Greene & Forster, 2004; Kozol, 2012; Shapiro, 2014). These three students of color needed to hear a different discourse— different from the negative official discourse that labeled them as “at-risk” or “low achiever.”

Nyama articulated her thoughts about her schooling at the alternative school and at her comprehensive school. She explained:

Well, because I feel like... at Change, they just let me be me. And I don't have to pretty much just go to school and have a mask on my face, or on my personality. And then everybody's just like... I don't know. Like, everybody's just... understanding there, and they don't judge. Or try to make me be somebody else. And I think, like, at the other school, I was like trying—they were trying to make me be somebody else.

What Nyama expressed was same message as Shapiro's (2014) when she contended, “These strategies reinforce the narrative that Whiteness is the desired norm, and that divergence from that norm is a form of deficit” (p. 390). All Nyama wanted was to be, as she said, “let me be me.” She continued, “And I don't have to pretty much just go to school and have a mask on my face, or on my personality.” When she could be herself without “a mask,” she was doing well at school.

According to these students' accounts, they did not find the same deficit discourse in the alternative school. They did not experience the labeling of the students as "at-risk," "underrepresented," or "poor," "low achiever." This type of discourse reinforced the master narrative that "claims that Chicana/Chicano, Latina/Latino, and Black children do not have the mental capacity of their White peers" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 30). This dominant discourse was most often based on the results of standardized testing that Nyama remembered. She lamented, "And then once test comes, like, we used to do these OAKs tests, and... like, my scores would be just so low. Like, mainly in reading and math." In other words, Nyama needed accommodation to be perform well on the OAKs test; the absence of accommodation caused her "failure."

In their alternative school, where Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama agreed unanimously that teachers cared for, respected, supported, and celebrated them, their success is notable. They discovered potential that they thought never existed in them. In the comprehensive school, Nyama said the teacher told her that she would never succeed in math. It was not letting her be or learn the way she could. When she left that environment, she began earning good grades.

Tatiana has been determined to go to college, an "HBCU," because what they tell her is "we are going to get you to college [because] you wanted to go to college." Even though college was not the only way to succeed, her teachers have been raising the bar high for her so she knows that she will graduate from high school. This asset-based

discourse differed from the deficit perspective that sees the students of color as not teachable (Greene & Forster, 2004).

In this study, my participants recognized that the alternative high school teachers and staff did not underestimate them. They did not use the crippling deficit discourse that positions students of color always in the losing end of the bargain.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with many phenomenological studies, mine had a very small sample size. Having the voice of only three students was a limitation of this study. That said, I selected these three students because the voices of students of color are often silenced when it comes to studying school experiences that impact their lives directly; the voices of students of color are too often ignored. It is my position that their voices can enlighten the often-subjective perspective of educational research, as their stories are often counter-narratives that challenge the “master narrative” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 30).

Another limitation was that I did not tap the voices of all minoritized races in the school. My study was limited to only Latin@ and African American students. While an Asian student consented to participate in the research, she dropped out of the study due to family problems. I recognize the value of hearing the voices of students of color from other demographics.

Another limitation was that the participants came from only one alternative high school. The study might benefit from tapping the voices of other students of color in two or three alternative high schools.

In addition, I did not interview teachers from the comprehensive schools or the alternative school to hear their perspective about what the students' thoughts, feelings, or perspectives. When I started this study, I was aware of my status as a cisgender Black male, activist, and educator. I remain aware of my biases when it comes to relating to the students of color. My passion and biases may have influenced how I interpreted the data. That is why I selected students that I did not know. I also applied the phenomenological reduction method, making sure to bracket (Giorgi, 1997) my past knowledge, my biases. When I was conducting the interview, I knew that I may have had power over these students—and been perceived as a threat (i.e., the authority that can report their words in a way that can be harmful to them or their family).

In this chapter, I used *in vivo* statements from the participants to describe the categories and themes of the study; this was helpful for building the credibility of my findings. In the next chapter, I synthesize the findings and tie my findings to the theoretical and research literature. Subsequently, I offer recommendations.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The purpose of my study was to describe and explain the perceptions of students of color about their experiences in an alternative high school. My specific problem was that students of color in a small, local alternative school, Change High School, need real opportunities to share their experiences. To explore this problem, I developed three research questions

1. How do students of color describe their experiences of alternative schools?
2. How do students of color explain how they learn in an alternative school?
3. How does the absence of the dominant discourse (e.g., the achievement gap) influence the experiences of students of color in an alternative high school?

To respond to these questions, I used a phenomenological inquiry using a three-part interview.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

In this study I found these following themes that led to the findings: Welcoming and Accommodating Environment, Teachers and support staff, School culture, School environment, Self-discovery, Fewer distractions, The not so good aspects of an alternative school.

Contrary to comprehensive schools, the alternative school is welcoming and accommodating, according to the participants. Students felt welcome and supported by teachers. Participants also thought that teachers and support staff were supportive and respectful of who they are and how they learn. This was the culture of the school. The school is caring, and understanding. The participants also agreed that the school

environment is healthy and conducive to learning. Teachers and staff are open, very positive and supporting the mental and emotional health of the students. The teachers develop positive pedagogic approaches that consider the students learning styles. Thanks to these approaches, the participants developed more self-esteem and self-confidence, all things that led to their staying at school. One of the advantages of alternative schools is the small size; therefore, the students felt that there were fewer distractions than in comprehensive schools. However, they also all agree that not all was bright. There were some aspects they did not like in their alternative schools.

All three participants regret that there are no sport structures and nice cafeteria in their alternative school. There is a trend that alternative schools are not well funded as the research show.

### **Situated in Larger Context**

My findings are in perfect agreements with the tenets of CRT as they show that students of color are not welcome in the education system. Many students of color generally have the difficult dilemma of conforming or dropping out (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 30). Their successes or adaptation to alternative education contradict the deficit theory of the so-called achievement gap. If they discovered that they could do math as Nyama did, or that they loved the alternative school and disapproved of the teaching approaches in comprehensive schools as all the participants did, they learned that comprehensive schools were not made for them.

CRT has always considered that American society as endemically racist and that they goal is to challenge the narrative of the dominant race. Considering CRT, it is very



clear that the opposition of the comprehensive school and alternative school is pertinent to the restructuring of the American public education system. Alternative schools as Change High School become a valid means to correct the injustices and the oppression of minoritized people in the comprehensive schools. As Horkheimer (1972) contended, the goal of critical theory is to free mankind from oppression.

My findings reflect the findings reported in my review of the literature. Oregon high schools lack strategies to integrate and welcome students of color. The account of the Lake Oswego high school incident of racism is an example among multiple others. The Lake Oswego school board immediately sought remediation by hiring a diversity director and putting together a diversity, equity, and inclusion task force composed of all demographics. The school board's response is a good first step to addressing racism in our schools.

Culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson Billings, 1994) and the recruitment of teachers and staff of color (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, and Papageorge, 2017) are also lacking in many of Oregon comprehensive high schools. Both Ronaldo and Nyama suffered the consequences of too few teachers of color and the lack of culturally relevant teaching practices. Informed staff and teachers would make supportive teams for the students. My findings show that three students of color received more support in their alternative schools than in their comprehensive schools.

Alternative schools provide a more positive culture than the comprehensive schools, as my participants asserted. They do not fear over-disciplining and suspension as in comprehensive schools (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011; U.S. Department of

Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014)—a vicious form of oppression in schools (Peguro, Bondy, & Shekarkhar, 2017). Alternative schools can fill the opportunity gap (Gorski, 2017) when they are well funded. My findings align with the research that shows how the so-called achievement gap is a false and dangerous concept (Ladson Billing, 2006; Milner, 2012).

As summarized in Chapter 2, the research literature about students in the oppressed groups reveals that these students suffer more from the multiple problems of education ranging from institutional racism (Gillborn, 2006; Trepagnier, 2017) to tolerance zero policies (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). All these problems are the real reasons many students, especially students of color, leave comprehensive public schools in the grips of liberal policies and politics (Anyon, 2014; Libby & Sanchez, 2011; Macleod, 2018; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001; Molnar, 2018). In this context of neoliberal capture of all sectors of education, minoritized communities are the most vulnerable. They are the most hit by the neoliberal policies which have it that education is more a commodity than a social service that should be for the emancipation of people.

Neoliberalism is an ideology that reinforces the social and economic inequalities. For example, the policies of school choice inspired by Friedman (1990) defund public schools—one of the only places disadvantaged groups rely upon. As in my study, alternative schools or the so-called failed schools reside in minoritized people's neighborhoods, making them victims of the very policies that pretend to save them. According to Gillborn (2014):

Neo-liberal policies are typically characterized by a desire to cut back state-funded provision, an individualized perspective that views success as a reflection of merit and hard work, and a belief that private provision is inherently superior. Neoliberalism typically works through colour-blind language that dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses. (p. 27)

In other words, these neoliberal policies do not favor people of color. In education, merit and hard work do not apply to the disadvantaged compared to their wealthier counterparts. The participants in my study who live in difficult socioeconomic conditions do not have less merit or do not work less than their friends. Instead, they are caught in the middle of these policies that pretend to be color-blind but really works against people of color.

My findings uncover some of the nuances of the neoliberal agenda as described by Schmeichel, Sharma, and Pittard (2017):

Textually oriented research can be very helpful in understanding the nature and scope of the efforts (e.g., Gates Foundation, Walton Foundation, Pearson Education, Business Roundtable) to recast U.S. public education in neoliberal terms and can reveal how neoliberal discourses are being used in an attempt to reshape education primarily as a private good, schools as service providers, and parents as consumers in an educational marketplace. (p. 201)

Such a commodification of education is of no use to the students of color in my study. They are left with the losing end of the bargain; literally the bargain in this so-called “marketplace” and their parents are the “consumers” of low quality services, as their

schools are underfunded. Yet it is tempting for these same parents to support the neoliberal model of charter schools rather than remain in the degenerating public school model (Lipman, 2011). The neoliberal discourse pretends to be color-blind and based on meritocracy; it is antithetical to CRT that challenges neutrality and meritocracy.

The students of color in my study—Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama—did not fare well because their comprehensive schools failed them; these schools were hostile and oppressive at best. In contrast, these three students of color thrived in alternative schools, which is why my study raises many implications

### **Implications**

The findings of my study have implications for students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers.

**Students.** Students are in dire need of safe spaces to thrive. The graduation rate of the class of 2018-2019 in Oregon is 80% (ODE). This means that 10% of students are not graduating, the majority of which are students of color. If we—members of society—make sure every student in Oregon receives abundant care (e.g., food safety, cultural recognition, socio-emotional support), we would raise the graduation rate and close the tunnel to prison. As seen in the finding, these three students of color have dreams of succeeding in life by going to college or trade schools that would lead them to good jobs and a good life.

**Teachers.** My study also shows that students' success is inherent to teachers' engagement, care, and support. All three students posit that they succeeded or felt important when their teachers showed them that they care, when the teacher supported

them. Teachers' role in the success of the students is even more important as they participate in the everyday lives of the students. Teaching should not only be about instruction; students' lives are storied lives that are complicated and sometimes very important for teachers to understand during an hour long of class interaction. Teachers should also exercise their role as cultural workers (Freire, 2018) and as intellectuals (Giroux, 1988). There is a dialectical relationship between schools and society; if the teachers do not know the students' lives, their social conditions and status, it is almost impossible to teach them right or to treat them right.

These three students of color demonstrated resilience and determination to transition from comprehensive schools where the system obviously ignored them to alternative schools where they made their self-discoveries. These students of color were more preoccupied with their visibility in school, by being seen and heard than learning. They wanted to be seen; they wanted teachers to take their daily lives and their narratives into account. They noticed that, most of the time, teachers only taught and cared about the dominant culture's narrative. Students of color were invisible. As Ronaldo said, there should be retraining of teachers so they understand their students. Students should not be subjects to whom teachers conveyed instructions all day long; students are conscience subjects with different narratives, different needs schools should meet. Teachers should divorce the banking model of education and espouse the problem-posing model (Freire, 2000) that allows students to reflect and dialogue with their teachers; the latter model fosters political and social consciousness that make the students change agents. Teachers should always be aware of the dialectical relationship between the word

(contents) and the world (real life). Only then can they be critical educators that allow students to think critically; and by doing so, students can participate in the change and making of their lives.

Participants felt that teachers often ignored, or simply dismissed, their voices. They did not think that teachers at the comprehensive schools understood them when they come to school carrying all the burden of social challenges, family problems. When they were angry, they could only voice it in a space they thought should be safe. Instead of hearing these students' calls for support, some teachers resorted to disciplinary measures. This was a perfect example of students of color, like Nyama, demeaning themselves as the school system teaches them to believe.

**School administrators.** Comprehensive high schools are often too bureaucratic to take care of students' life. Their generalization of curriculum and the way to deliver it makes it inefficient and antidemocratic. Students of color like Tatiana, Ronaldo, and Nyama feel left out. To them, it feels as if comprehensive schools teach them how to cook, while they are starving. They need food first before learning to cook. Making high schools a safe space linked to everyday life would be a huge improvement towards equity and inclusion. Students should feel safe and cared for in school; sometimes schools are safer than home for many students. The school administrators should also minimize, if not abandon, the referrals and disciplinary actions for better ways of dealing with students' behavior. School administrators should encourage and provide all-inclusive professional development trainings to make sure the school staff and teachers are aware of culturally responsive pedagogies and other effective inclusive practices.

Most of the time school administrators are more preoccupied by the funding and daily operation of their schools rather than developing comprehensive system that make their students feel at home, respected, and cared for. Funding is important, but it should be the role of the policymakers.

**Policy makers.** It is also important to recognize that the students in alternative schools are not all at-risk; this is our society that is at-risk if we do not treat these students as people in search of a meaning to their lives. These students have agencies; they have projects and positive life goals. All three of the students plan to go to college after their graduation. It is important to start a progressive reform of the alternative schools; they lack funding and infrastructures. They should not be a punitive way for those who cannot make it to traditional schools. The same reasons why they are not successful in comprehensive school are present in alternative school. If schools are not well funded, restructured, and deeply reformed, alternative and comprehensive schools serve only the lucky few.

During the past three decades, Oregon legislators made important decisions—for example, passing the Oregon Minority Teacher Act of 1991. This act recognized and encouraged the importance of recruiting teachers of color. While the act was commendable and great step forward, the reality on the ground showed another picture. Though students of color represented more than a third of the Oregon student population, teachers of color remained at less than 9 % of the teacher population (Oregon Education Investment Board, 2014).

Additional good news has been the recent funding of more educational opportunities for students of color. The Student Success Act (2019) has designated a historic \$2 billion investment in Oregon's P-12 education system. Through the Student Success Act, Portland Public Schools applied for funding from the Student Investment Account (SIA); the district has anticipated receiving funds for programs that support students of color:

- Alternative Education funding: \$300,000;
- Students of color leadership activities funding: \$1,097,000;
- Partnership with culturally specific organizations: \$3,400,000 (Portland Public School, 2020).

These initiatives are critical steps for supporting minoritized populations to have a better chance of success in their schooling. A steady funding of these programs may result in better outcomes for students of color in school. The partnership with culturally specific organizations, when controlled and well assessed, is a pathway to recognizing and enforcing culturally responsive ways of minoritized students.

Helping alternative school have better infrastructures and funding is also commendable.

Policymakers should develop and fund small size schools that can cater to all the needs. Inclusive schools demand funding. Rather than putting money in large comprehensive schools, it makes more sense to fund small schools, or small size classrooms with well-trained teachers.

Policymakers should keep in mind that comprehensive high schools are not adapted to minoritized people. In Oregon, the minoritized populations are increasing.



Forgetting or ignoring to take care of needs of minoritized students is not only unfair, but it is also a dangerous trend as far as the future of a state is concerned. Students of color are at-risk of falling to the school-to prison or the street-to prison pipelines. With the social, economic, and political costs of these pipelines, it is much more economical, sensible to tackle the situation in the schools before it gets to the carceral system.

The participants in my study offer solutions to their problems, their isolation, and their oppression. They voiced them vehemently during our time together. Listening to these oppressed and suppressed voices is one way to finding solutions to the alarming problems our schools are facing.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

When I started this journey, I knew that I was not going to find a generalizable theory or solution. This was due in part by my research design—phenomenology—and my focus on a small number of participants at one alternative school. Throughout my research journey, I recognized that three students of color do not represent the voices of all students of color.

For future research, I recommend designing studies with more participants at both alternative and comprehensive schools. I also recommend including teachers and support staff of comprehensive and alternative schools as participants. Considering the students' narratives with the narratives of teachers and support staff would provide additional insight into the problem. In addition, future research should focus on the differences of success in large comprehensive high schools and small alternative schools. Such research could give alternative schools more recognition as a model of care and teaching

that could be helpful for educators and policymakers. Furthermore, I recommend that future researchers examine the efficiency of alternative schools and why students of color find them to be more attractive than comprehensive schools.

### **Concluding Remarks**

At the end of my study, I think that our schools need a certain code of ethics to frame how to be caring, respectful, inclusive, and efficient. Among the thousands of students who leave schools, most are “lack of support” casualties. Schools must cease to be insensitive places that only care about curriculum content and not about the lives of those who consider them as the only safe places where they can find food, knowledge, love, and care. My study shows that students of color who are often dismissed have much to say about their learning than is evident in any textbook, school policy, or practice. We must hear and honor the voices of these minoritized students. Their voices contain many of the solutions that so-called experts are trying to find. It would suffice to listen to them. Their voices are full of wisdom; they represent epistemologies without which no viable reform can move forward. Their voices are the beginning of a dialogue for genuine school reform.

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## **Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research**

### **Portland State University**

#### **The Perceptions of Students of Color about Their Alternative High School Experiences: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

December 3, 2018

##### Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being done by Micki M. Caskey, Principal Investigator, and Massene Mboup, doctoral student, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. This research is studying the experiences of students of color at Change High School (a pseudonym).

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a student of color at Change High School.

This form will explain the research study, and will also explain the possible risks as well as the possible benefits to you. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. If you have any questions, please ask one of the study investigators.

*What will happen if I decide to participate?*

If you agree to participate, the following things will happen:

You will take part in three interviews. Each interview will take approximately 90 minutes. You will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of each interview.

*How long will I be in this study?*

Participation in this study will take a total of 4.5-5.0 hours over a period of 2 months.

*What are the risks or side effects of being in this study?*

There are risks of stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.

By participating in the research, you are taking some unknown risks. By doing an interview, you may have some emotional discomfort; however, Massene Mboup will work hard to minimize such discomforts.

For more information about risks and discomforts, ask the investigator.

*What are the benefits to being in this study?*

The major benefit of being part of this study is giving voice to your school experiences. Your participation may help to shed light on oppression in school and how you can resist this oppression. You may be able to make a difference in your school

*How will my information be kept confidential?*

We will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information, but we cannot guarantee confidentiality of all study data. Data will be stored in locked cabinets and on password protected computers. After data collection, names, places and anything that can identify you will be protected. Prior to publication, all personal information will be de-identified.

Information contained in your study records is used by study staff. The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees human subject research and/or other entities may be permitted to access your records, and there may be times when we are required by law to share your information. It is the investigator's legal obligation to report child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, harm to self or others or any life-threatening situation to the appropriate authorities, and; therefore, your confidentiality will not be maintained.

Your name will not be used in any published reports about this study.

*Will I be paid for taking part in this study?*

No, you will not be paid to participate in the study. You will receive a gift card to cover the costs of your transportation.

*Can I stop being in the study once I begin?*

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

*Whom can I call with questions or complaints about this study?*

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints at any time about the research study, Micki M. Caskey (503-725-4749) or Massene Mboup (503-490-0686) will be glad to answer them. If you need to contact someone after business hours or on weekends, please call 503-490-0686 and ask for Massene.

*Whom can I call with questions about my rights as a research participant?*

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may call the PSU Office for Research Integrity at (503) 725-2227 or 1(877) 480-4400. The ORI is the office that supports the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from PSU and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human participants. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at <https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity>.

## CONSENT

You are making a decision whether to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided (or the information was read to you). By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research participant.

You have had an opportunity to ask questions and all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

---

Name of Adult Subject (print)

---

Signature of Adult Subject

---

Date

## INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE

This research study has been explained to the participant and all of his/her questions have been answered. The participant understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

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Name of Investigator/ Research Team Member (type or print)

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(Signature of Investigator/ Research Team Member)

---

Date

## **Appendix B: Consent Form for Children Ages 13 -18**

### **Portland State University**

#### **The Perceptions of Students of Color about Their Alternative High School Experiences: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

Micki M. Caskey, Principal Investigator, and Massene Mboup, doctoral student, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in College of Education at Portland State University are doing a research study about students' experiences in an alternative high school.

#### **What Will I Have To Do?**

If you decide to take part in this project, we will ask you to:

- Participate in individual interviews. The set includes three 90-minute interviews. Each interview will be guided by a set of questions.

#### **Are There Any Risks?**

There are possible risks of some emotional discomfort. You do not have to take part in this study. If you do agree to take part, you may feel discomfort because of what you are asked to talk about. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. And if you don't want to go on, you can stop at any time. If you are upset after the study and need to talk with someone, you can call Dr. Micki Caskey (503-725-4749) at the College of Education at Portland State University; she is the person leading the project in Portland. You will also be able to seek support from your school guidance counselor if you want to talk about your discomfort related to your experiences in an alternative high school.

#### **What Will I Get In Return?**

- You will receive no money as compensation for taking part in this study. You will receive a gift card to cover the cost of your transportation.
- You may also feel good about knowing you are helping others. Many people feel good about helping others. We can learn so much from you about students' experiences in an alternative high school.

#### **What Are You Doing To Protect Me?**

Your privacy is very important to us. We have done many things to protect you:

- We will not tell anyone if you take part in this study or not.



- When we talk, it will be in a private place—an empty classroom. This means no one will be able to overhear what you tell me.
- Your name and what you tell me will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. (By “kept confidential,” I mean that the names of people who take part in the study will not be given to anyone else. It means that I will only reveal what you say in a way that no one could ever guess or know it was you who said it.) If, in the course of the study, you disclose that you are, or are intending to, harm yourself or others, we are ethically and legally required to notify the appropriate authorities.
- Only staff from the research project (Massene Mboup and Micki Caskey) will know what you say.
- Your name and other personal information, which we need to keep track during the research, will be kept in a locked file cabinet or in a locked file on the computer so that no one other than the research staff will be able to see it. For example, this form (which has your name on it) will be kept in a locked file cabinet.
- When we write or talk about what we learned in this study, we will leave things out so no one will be able to tell who we are talking about.

### **Any Questions?**

If you have any questions about this study or this form, you can talk to the person leading the project in Portland, Dr. Micki M. Caskey at 503-725-4749. You can also contact the Office of Research Integrity of Portland State University about your rights as a research participant (someone who takes part in a study). Hours are 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The office is located at Portland State University, Market Center Building, Ste. 620, Portland, OR 97201. The telephone number is 503-725-2227.

### **If I Sign, What Does It Mean?**

This is a consent form. Your signature below means that:

- You have read and understand what this form says.
- You are willing to take part in the study.
- You know that you do not have to take part in this study. And even if you agree, you can change your mind and stop at any time. No problem
- If you found out about this study at your school, you know that taking part in this study has nothing to do with the education you get there. If you agree to take part

in this study or if you say no to take part in this study, does not matter. Everyone will treat you the same.

- You will get a copy of this form to keep for yourself.

---

Participant Signature

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Date

---

Participant name, printed

---

Interviewer/Witness/Legal Guardian Signature

---

Date

---

Interviewer/Witness/Legal Guardian name, printed

**Appendix C: Child Assent****Portland State University****The Perceptions of Students of Color about Their Alternative High School Experiences: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

**Child's name** \_\_\_\_\_

Your parents (or guardian) have said that it is okay for you to take part in a project about the experiences of students of color at Change High School. If you choose to do it, you will be asked to participate in three interviews. **Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes.**

If you want to rest, or stop completely, just tell me—you won't get into any trouble! In fact, if you don't want to do it at all, you don't have to. Just say so. Also, if you have any questions about what you will be doing, just ask me to explain.

If you do want to try it, please sign your name on the line below. Remember—you can stop to rest at any time, and if you decide not to take part anymore, let me know.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Child's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Investigator's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Printed Name

## **Appendix D: Recruitment Material**

### **Questionnaire**

Please respond to the following questions.

1. Have you participated or conducted research about schools or school experiences?  
If so, please describe these.
2. Would you be interested in talking about your experiences in school? If so, why?
3. What do you think of school in general?
4. Describe some of the changes you would like to see in schools?

If you are interested in participating in a study about school experiences, please attend the information session in Room No 3, Wednesday January 16, 2019 at 4:00 PM.

Please RSVP: [researchtotransgress@gmail.com](mailto:researchtotransgress@gmail.com)

## Appendix E: Interview Protocol

I used a three-part interview structure to collect my data.

### Part I

Part I of the interview explores the life history of the participant (Seidman, 2013).

Script:

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I designed the questions in this interview to gather information about your life experiences, specifically experiences in high school. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions we discuss. You may choose not to answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also choose to withdraw from this interview or research study at any time with no penalty or consequence.*

*I will be using a semi-structured interview protocol. This means that after answering questions, I may ask you a follow-up question to collect more information. After the interview, I will provide you with a written transcript of the interview. You will be able to review your responses and make changes to clarify or correct meaning.*

*At the conclusion of this research study, I will use the data as part of my dissertation research. At no time will your name or personal identifying information be used in my dissertation or presentations of my findings.*

*In this first interview, we will talk about your prior life experiences.*

1. Please tell me about your school background.
2. What schools have you attended?
3. Tell me about your experience in high school?
4. Please describe the reason(s) for leaving your former school.

5. How did your family feel about your leaving your former school?
6. Tell me about how you feel in current high school? Why do you feel that way?
7. In what ways have you been treated fairly in school? Please elaborate.
8. In what ways have you been treated unfairly in school? Please elaborate.
9. Please share examples of when you felt valued.
10. Please share examples of when you did not feel valued.
11. Tell me about the types of support you need in school.
  - a. Which supports did you have?
  - b. Which supports did you not have?

## Part II

Part II the contemporary experience of the participant (Seidman, 2013).

Script:

*Thank you for again for agreeing to participate in this research study. Remember there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions we discuss. You may choose not to answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also choose to withdraw from this interview or research study at any time with no penalty or consequence.*

*As in the first interview, I will be using a semi-structured interview protocol. This means that after answering questions, I may ask you a follow-up question to collect more information. After the interview, I will provide you with a written transcript of the interview. You will be able to review your responses and make changes to clarify or correct meaning.*

*At the conclusion of this research study, I will use the data as part of my dissertation research. At no time will your name or personal identifying information be used in my dissertation or presentations of my findings.*

*In this second interview, we will talk about your current experiences, specifically those related to leaving your former school.*

1. What was it like for you to leave your former school?
2. Why did you come to this school?
3. Tell me about the differences between your former school and your current school.
4. In your own words, tell me about your experience in your current school.
5. How are your current school experiences different from your prior school experiences?
6. In what ways do you think it easier to stay in school than in the past?
7. In what ways do you think it harder to stay in school than in the past?
8. How has your family life changed since coming to your current school?
9. Do you feel you have more support in your current school? If yes, please describe. If no, please explain.

### Part III

Part III of the interview explores the participant reflection of the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2013).

*Thank you for again for agreeing to participate in this research study. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions we discuss. You may choose not to*

*answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also choose to withdraw from this interview or research study at any time with no penalty or consequence.*

*As in the previous interviews, I will be using a semi-structured interview protocol. This means that after answering questions, I may ask you a follow-up question to collect more information. After the interview, I will provide you with a written transcript of the interview. You will be able to review your responses and make changes to clarify or correct meaning.*

*As I explained earlier, I will use the data as part of my dissertation research. At no time will your name or personal identifying information be used in my dissertation or presentations of my findings.*

*In this third interview, we will continue to talk about your experiences and your reflection about those experiences.*

1. What does it mean to you to leave your former school?
2. How do you make sense of your present situation (in your current school)?
3. Reflecting on your decision to leave your former school, what made you want to leave?
4. What role did you play in leaving school?
5. What role did others play in your leaving school?
6. Looking back, who or what do you think caused you to leave school?
7. What roles could teachers, families, or friends play to make your schooling easier?



8. Thinking back, do you remember any teacher, family member, or friend encouraging you to stay in school? Please elaborate.
9. Thinking back, do you remember any teacher, family member, or friend encouraging you to drop out of school? Please elaborate.